

MY CONVERSION JOURNEY WITH CHRISTIAN CARDINAL TUMI

Martin Jumbam



VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

My Conversion Journey with Christian Cardinal Tumi

Martin Jumbam



Langaa Research & Publishing CIG
Mankon, Bamenda

Publisher

Langaa RPCIG

Langaa Research & Publishing Common Initiative Group

P.O. Box 902 Mankon

Bamenda

North West Region

Cameroon

Langaagrp@gmail.com

www.langaa-rpcig.net

Distributed in and outside N. America by African Books Collective

orders@africanbookscollective.com

www.africanbookscollective.com

ISBN: 9956-792-89-6

© Martin Jumbam 2015

DISCLAIMER

All views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Langaa RPCIG.

Table of Contents

Preface.....	v
 Part One: The Journey Begins.....	1
1. I marched with Christian Cardinal Tumi.....	3
2. I spent a week with the Cistercian monks in Mbengwi.....	15
 Part Two: My Prayer Life Firms Up.....	35
1. Come, follow me!.....	37
2. Foyer de Charité, an oasis of silence in Bonjongo.....	49
3. A prayer at the University of Buea.....	53
4. Jesus heals in silence.....	57
5. I walked beside a Saint.....	61
 Part Three: My Interest In Church Governance Grows.....	73
1. The Catholic Church and the radio.....	75
2. Train seminarians to be good managers of human and finance resources.....	87
3. Keep processions and the homily short.....	91
4. Father, watch your health.....	97
5. Giving to the Church is a Christian duty.....	101
6. The Catholic Church and the Reunification of Cameroon.....	105
7. I remember Father Paul Verdzekov.....	109
 Part Four: The Social Dimension Of My Faith.....	119
1. The devastating consequences of abortion.....	121
2. The Justice and Peace Commission of the Bamenda Archdiocese.....	125
3. I salute you, Professor Daniel Noni Lantum.....	133
4. Why I donate blood.....	151

Preface

Saint Augustine once wrote: “Reaching Milan, I found your devoted servant Ambrose, who was known throughout the world as a man whom there were few to equal in goodness. Unknown to me, it was you who led me to him, so that I might knowingly be led by him to you”¹. I could very well express similar feelings about my first encounter with Christian Cardinal Tumi, the Emeritus Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Douala, Cameroon.

Unknown to me, the Lord led me to him and he knowingly led me back to the Lord. It all began on January 1, 1993 when I joined the first of what has become a tradition in the Catholic Church that is in Douala, what Cardinal Tumi himself called “The March for Peace” around the city of Douala. Our country, Cameroon, then stood in dire need of peace as the notoriously intolerant political establishment of the day was desperately trying to stifle the audible, painful and violent birth pangs of multi-party democracy in our land. Christian Cardinal Tumi is one of the few sons and daughters of our land who have had an eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation with the proponents of political intolerance in our land and lived to tell the tale. Many others, who dared to ask why, including the Cardinal’s fellow religious leaders, are today history.

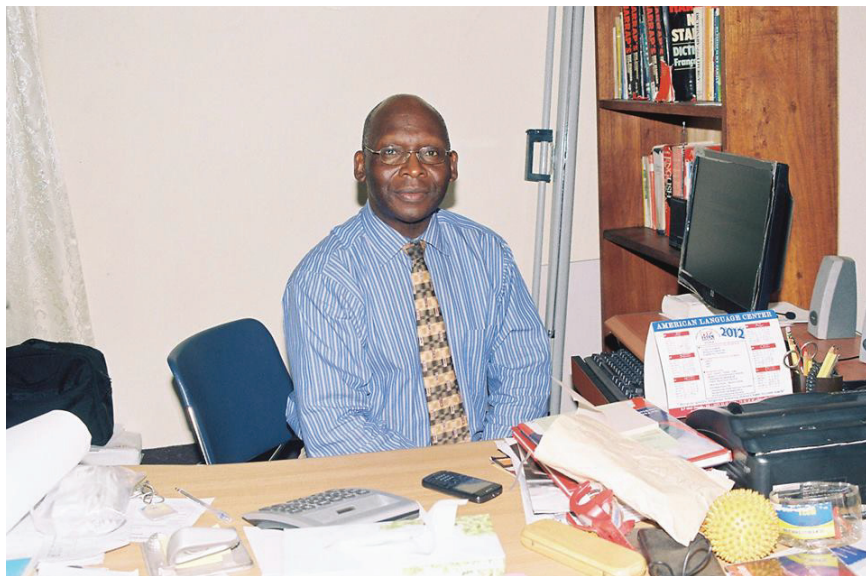
In January 1993, I was a young journalist yearning for news and who else to track than the fiery Archbishop of Douala, who created news by his mere imposing presence anywhere, anytime? As I accompanied him in what ended up to be a well-over-five-hour procession around the city of Douala, hoping to beat every other journalist with news of whatever dramatic encounter we might have along the way with the forces of law and order, little did I know that the Lord was leading me to him that he may in turn lead me back to the Lord. It was only later that I realised that I was a mere penitent whose restless soul, to paraphrase Saint Augustine again, could only find rest when, and if, it rested in the Lord.

What has this journey of faith alongside Christian Cardinal Tumi done to, and for, me as a Christian, a journalist and a writer? Quite a lot! First of all, it has given my prayer life considerable strength, although, every so often, I still have to run to the Master with the cry: 'I do have faith, Lord, but help me to have more!' (Mk 9: 24). Secondly, I have come to see the way the Church functions from an angle I would otherwise never have seen. This is reflected in a number of articles included in this book on the Church and its governance. Thirdly, each time I pore over a blank sheet of paper, wondering how to stain it with my thoughts, I always hear Saint James whispering in the ear of my mind that faith devoid of action is a dead faith (Jas 2 : 14).

That is why I have included articles in this book that reflect my views on issues of justice, peace, and reconciliation, themes that are so dear to our Church in Africa. I have also expressed open gratitude and admiration to, and for, people, near and far, whose actions have influenced my life in one way or another. In this journey of faith with Christian Cardinal Tumi, I have decided that all I do and all I write must be coated with the garment of my faith.

My encounters with Christian Cardinal Tumi have activated, nourished and inspired my faith in myriad ways, directly and indirectly, as the articles included in this collection suggest.

Martin Jumbam



Martin Jumbam at his office in Douala



Christian Cardinal Tumi
Emeritus Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Douala
Delivering a Sermon



Christian Cardinal Tumi in Douala

I marched with Christian Cardinal Tumi

(Revised and reproduced from Cameroon Panorama N^{os}. 376 of April 1993; pp. 17-19) and 377 of May 1993; pp. 18-21).

The news of the “March for Peace”, which His Eminence Christian Cardinal Tumi was organising was in the air all week long, but the details were rather sketchy. That is why I was not sure of what to expect as I approached the large crowd in front of the small Saint John’s Parish Church in Deido, Douala, at 7 o’clock on the morning of January 1, 1993.

No placards?

What struck me as I scanned the crowd for a face to pin a name on, was the absence of placards and banners. I had thought that I would find an excited, noisy crowd waving a forest of banners and placards, bearing high-sounding slogans, calling on the powers-that-be to restore to our land and people the peace that once was theirs. But, what I saw surprised me: just simple, ordinary people, mainly women of a certain age, many of them dressed in white or in deep blue uniforms, lining up behind a crucifix, singing songs of praise to the Lord and telling the beads of their rosaries.

I was still wondering what to make of it all, when I saw Doctor Arnold Yongbang a few feet away. With Doctor Yongbang there, I began to breathe a little easier as I knew I would have answers to some of the questions I had on my mind. A few days earlier, I had stopped by his house, as I so often do whenever I need reliable information on just about anything happening in the land, to get details on the impending march, but he hadn’t been more enlightened on it than I was, not having seen nor talked with the Cardinal that past week.

The Cardinal's ring

'You've answered present then, eh?', Doctor Yongbang asked as we shook hands with each other. 'Couldn't miss this for anything in the world', I remember answering him. We were still wondering about the itinerary of the march when we saw the tall figure of the Cardinal towering above a small crowd a few feet away. That was the first time I had ever come that close to His Eminence, and I wouldn't have known how to greet him had Doctor Yongbang not immediately gone up to him, taken his hand in his and kissed the ring on it, genuflecting in the process. That was new to me; so I, too, took His Eminence's hand in mine, brought his ringed-finger to my lips, genuflecting as I had seen Dr. Yongbang do. The action was so fast that I didn't have the time to take a closer look at that ring as I would have loved to.

Bishop Awa's ring

Just then, my mind raced back in time to the day I met Monsignor Pius Awa of Buea in his cousin, Mr. Peter Akumchi's house in Yaounde some seven years or so earlier. That was the first time I came face-to-face with such a high-ranking official of the Catholic Church. I remember approaching him with a mixture of awe and uncertainty but, to my greatest surprise, delight and relief, Monsignor Awa suddenly said something unbelievably funny, and before I knew it, I was already at ease with him, asking him questions that have always intrigued me about the Catholic Church, and getting frank and direct answers wrapped in a seemingly inexhaustible fount of down-to-earth humour I hadn't imagined a prince of the church could be endowed with.

When I had to leave, I noticed that Bishop Awa, who had taken off the ring from his finger for a while, quickly put it back on before offering me his hand. I remember hesitating for a second, not knowing what to do, and then deciding just to shake it. Now I know I should have kissed his ring and perhaps knelt down for his blessing. That was what his Lordship probably expected me to do as well. Don't we learn everyday!

Call off the march

As we greeted the Cardinal that morning, that usual, broad, warm, reassuringly contagious smile opened up on his face as he jokingly said: 'Weti wuna di do here, you pagan people dem?' Then, casting his eyes from that commanding height of his over the crowd that was growing by the minute, he said: 'I hope no one shows up here in a party uniform or with a party banner'. We also echoed the same hope. Then he added: 'The government has been very scared of this march and has sent delegation after delegation to me to call it off'. That was news to me and I asked why.

'Well, that is because they don't believe that a gathering of this nature at this time can be devoid of politics.' Then he added with that disarming smile of his: 'But, I told them this march had nothing to do with their politics. This is a purely religious event and I won't call it off.'

I recall someone near me wondering aloud if that was the reason the place was, in his word "swarming" with CENER (secret police) agents. To prove his point, he pointed to one fellow loitering around the corner and to another one pretending to be repairing a motorbike a few feet away, but who kept shooting furtive glances at us. He also showed us another suspicious group of three or four individuals lurking at another corner who he also identified as plain-clothes men, claiming he knew their type well and that they were up to no good. I don't know how the Cardinal would have reacted to that claim, but he didn't hear it, busy as he was greeting those who came up to him.

Many would die for Maria

Just then a beautifully decorated pick-up truck drove into the mission yard, bearing the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary. His Eminence looked at the crowd milling about the yard and remarked, with a smile on his face: 'There are many people in this country who would not hesitate to lay down their lives for Maria.'

Then the pick-up truck swung round and began slowly to move out of the yard. The Cardinal with one or two of his priests and some altar boys, took their places behind it, and we fell in line a few yards

behind them. As we came out onto the street, I was surprised to see that the head of the procession was nowhere in sight. I also looked behind me and the crowd in the churchyard seemed to have grown tenfold.

I had no rosary!

A woman next to me intoned a song in a language I guessed was Ewondo. This was followed by much hand clapping and dancing. After that song, another woman began to recite the rosary. I saw just about everyone with a rosary in hand and it suddenly dawned on me that I might be the only one there without one. For a few minutes, I felt at a loss, wondering whether I really belonged with that crowd of believers at all. What intensified that feeling of loss and guilt was the sudden realisation that I couldn't even recite a single prayer in French correctly; neither the 'Hail Mary', nor the Lord's Prayer. I then decided that I would say the prayers in English instead. There, too, I stumbled on one or two words and gave up the exercise. What of Lamnso, my native tongue? There, I had better luck, but my mind kept straying to the French prayers around me.

I was still wondering how best to immerse myself in the prayers when Gregory Alem, a CRTV journalist on FM 105, walked up to me. I asked him in a whisper if he was on duty, and he said he was there to join the march, having decided that he could no longer stay on the sidelines while others were doing so much to shape the history of our land. That was why he was determined, he said, to join the Cardinal's march for peace.

The Cardinal was already nearly a kilometre ahead of me although when we started off, I was only a few yards behind him. As we went along, more and more people were joining the procession and preferring to be as close to the Cardinal and the statue of the Virgin Mary as possible. It was not long before Gregory and I were far apart from each other.

Fallen by the wayside

All around me, prayers and songs rose and fell as groups sent their praise and admiration to the Lord. I realised to my horror that I could neither recognise nor join in any of those songs or prayers. It then began to dawn on me that I had indeed fallen by the wayside in my religious life. Not that I hadn't been aware of it, though; but it was how far away I had fallen from the right path that hit me with such frightening suddenness.

Unable to join the chorus around me, I decided I would withdraw into myself and try to come to grips with my relationship with God since such an opportunity to stare into the rear-view mirror of my life uninterrupted for hours on end, had never presented itself to me before. As we wound our way at a snail's pace through tiny, pothole-laden streets, from Deido through Bepanda Voirie to Ndokoti and well beyond, I suddenly felt how the dregs of all those years of neglect of my Christian life had hardened and were weighing down so heavily on the shoulders of my conscience.

Here I am, Lord!

The only other time I felt an outsider in church was on April 22, 1992 in the Cathedral in Bamenda during the ordination of five young men into the sacred priesthood. Maika, my wife, Mrs. Rita Bomki Akumchi, her cousin, and I had travelled from Douala the Saturday before to be present at that ceremony to witness one of ours, George Tomrila Ngalim, take his place among the clergy of this nation.

George has always been like a younger brother to me, just as I had been like one to his father, the late Joseph Ngalim, a simple man who had lived a simple, honest life of a great Catholic Christian.

As I stood there watching George, I felt really sad that his father couldn't be there with us to see his first son take the vow of the priesthood. In fact, I fought back a tear when George answered the Lord's call, and his mother, accompanied by his junior brother, Stephen, standing in for his father, led him by the hand to the altar to

surrender him to His Grace Archbishop Paul Verdzekov, as their own gift to the Almighty Father.

I remember His Grace Archbishop Verdzekov's commanding voice exhorting his fellow priests to abide by the dictates of their vocation. If you cannot stand the smoke, he told them, get out of the kitchen. That was one of the most profound sermons I have ever listened to. The power of that message seemed to be amplified by the magnificence of the music, which the conducting priest, Reverend Father William Neba, standing on a raised platform, seemed to be literally pulling out of the belly of the cathedral with his arms. Music of rare beauty and intensity. Heart-lifting sounds, which I still sometimes hear, in my mind's ear, whenever I take a momentary respite from the rat race. It brought tears to my eyes.

The river of age

On that day, my mind was not so much on George – even though it was his day – as it was on his father, whom the Lord had called 'home' some years ago. I recalled that in August of 1984 when I returned home after several years abroad, one of the first things my old mother asked of me, was to go down to Gharu, Joseph Ngalim's compound, to greet him for, she said, he had been very ill and would be pleased to see me.

My family has always considered me Joseph Ngalim's 'son' because of the liking he had taken for me from the time I was only a child. I must have been only five or six years old when he, still a young primary school pupil, asked my parents to allow me to stay with him in a hut he had, like all young men of his age, built for himself in his parent's compound of Gharu, a kilometre or so away from our compound at Mboon.

I still have fond memories of those childhood days when I would play in the yard with other children of his compound while watching out for him. When he came back home, I would run up to him and he would always give me something to eat, usually a piece of meat from the day's hunt, or a fruit.

My friends and I would sometimes play by the banks of River Mensai that takes its rise from the Ngongba hills that brood so menacingly above. River Mensai, today a mere shadow of its former self, used to rush down the hills into the valley, seeming to us who had never seen any other bigger river, frighteningly massive, as it wound and unwound itself down the valley like a huge wounded snake. We were always warned against playing too close to it as it was said to be unforgiving to anyone who was foolish enough to fall into it.

Thinking of those days, over thirty years later, on that bright, sunny day in August of 1984, was like taking a ride up the river of age to those days of unblemished innocence.

Out of touch

As I walked down the hill leading to his house, I wondered what I would say to him. Whenever I was home on vacation, my mother would always ask me to go to Tobin and visit him and his family. He was always very happy to see me and took a keen interest in my academic progress. Unfortunately, as my quest for the ‘Golden Fleece’ took me further and further into the beckoning, wide world, I lost touch with him.

So, it was with a very heavy heart and guilt feelings that I walked into his house that sunny August afternoon. As I took his hand in mine, a smile walked its way across his agony-wrinkled face. He could hardly turn his head as his neck hurt him so badly. I recall fighting hard to halt a lump that was already crawling unrelentingly up to my throat, always a prelude to a flood of tears, which I could already feel warm on my cheeks.

I remember apologising profusely for my protracted silence over the years. In his usual manner, he merely smiled and said he had been wondering if he had done me wrong, but that all that was now history as he was happy I had thought of him immediately I returned home. It was then that the tears came tumbling from my eyes, a bucket-full. I was to let another generous flood of tears wash my face some months later when I learnt of his death. He had apparently

recovered and gone back to work when the illness struck again, and he succumbed to it. I was in Yaounde, trying to find a job and feed a family, and couldn't unfortunately attend his funeral. I did, however, pray that the Lord receive him with trumpet blasts.

August 29

Meanwhile, the Cardinal-led procession continued its slow, dignified and graceful journey through the streets of the nation's economic capital. I came out of my reverie only long enough to notice how far we had gone, and then I was back in my shell again.

I remember that a few years ago, on a dreary, rainy and foggy morning of August 29, I stood over Joseph Ngalim's grave in the small cemetery below the Church in my village of Nkar. August 29 is a memorable day to my family, being the day my father-in-law, Pa Anthony Tala, a long-time teacher of the Catholic School in Nkar, died. On that dreary morning, my wife and I joined the other members of the family to call on the Lord to accept Pa Anthony Tala, our father and His humble servant, among His chosen flock. Afterward, I walked over to Joseph Ngalim's grave and communed for a while with one of the greatest souls that ever lived on earth. George, then a deacon, was also present.

My beloved ones

Beside my father-in-law and Joseph Ngalim, many a loved one of mine also reposes in that small church cemetery. Monica Bongberi, my only sister, lies a few feet away. She had given up the struggle against a merciless ailment and had passed away right in front of my eyes some ten years earlier. I remember that even though she died in my presence, I only felt the impact of her absence one year later when I went back home on vacation. I remember standing above her compound, waiting in vain for those shouts of welcome and warm hugs and smiles of joy, which I was so used to. I stood there staring into space, tears abundantly washing my face, to the surprise of many. May the Lord Almighty place His soothing hand on Monica's forehead!

Not far from Monica, lies Gertrude, my sister-in-law. Our phone rang one summer Sunday morning in Edmonton, Canada. I picked it up and an emotion-drenched voice told me that Gertrude was no longer with us. When the impact of that reality finally hit home, I jumped up, screaming and refusing to believe what I had just been told. Her husband, Kenjo, my brother, had left Laval in Quebec, where he had been studying, only a few days before, and hadn't even had the time to call to inform us of his safe arrival in Cameroon, when we learnt of his wife's death.

Maika, a regular church-goer, nearly pulled me by the hand to church that Sunday morning to pray for the repose of Gertrude's soul. 'Even if the devil has truly made his home in your heart', I remember her telling me as I grudgingly trudged behind her, 'at least, on a day like this, you should ask the Lord to forgive your sister-in-law her sins and welcome her into His kingdom'. I knew she was right, although I didn't want to seem too eager to agree with her. I did, however, follow her to church to ask God to welcome Gertrude among His chosen few.

John, my boyhood friend.

A few feet away, under a fresh mound of earth, lies one of my childhood friends, John Fondzeyuf. John and I had served our first Mass as altar boys together way back then. I remember shocking my mother by waking up too early to go to church that day. John and I had been selected the previous day to serve our first Mass that morning, and had been warned not to be late. Despite my mother's threats to tan my skin if I didn't go back to bed immediately, I left for church, arriving when it was still very dark and, to my surprise, John was already there, dressed and waiting. You could have heard our heart-beats a mile away as we later accompanied the priest to the altar under the close and critical scrutiny of the elder altar boys, our trembling backs to the congregation.

I still find it difficult to believe that John is no longer with us. I hadn't been able to attend his funeral, but the impact of his death had hit me a few months later when I went to greet his family in Yaounde.

I walked in and was greeted by John's picture staring at me from the wall. I sat down on one of the all-too-familiar chairs, talking to Aloysia, his wife, and it was just as it had always been. It even looked as if John would walk out of the room any time to join us. I could still hear his voice, in my mind's ear, as usual noisily contesting my claim to a traditional title, calling me, albeit jokingly, an impostor. We would then engage in friendly gibes at each other for hours on end. As those memories made their way back to mind, I felt tears welling up in my eyes, and it was with some difficulty that I held them back from his children. May the Lord give John a huge pat of welcome on the back!

In that small cemetery, lie people who have been precious to me. Hopefully, when my own time runs out, my mortal remains, too, will join those of my loved ones at one corner of that cemetery. My soul, God willing, will link hands with all my family members who have slept in the Lord to give praise and thanks to God Almighty for eternity.

Peace with myself

Those were the thoughts that were winding their way through my mind at the same snail's pace as we went through the streets of Douala. Never before that day did I realise how much I needed to incise my past as a way of coming to full grips with my present life of a fallen Christian. Thereafter, I suddenly felt at peace with myself. I still, however, felt inadequate before the Lord. I couldn't remember the last time I ever spent more than a few minutes in church. I would, more often than not, drive my family to the church door, drop them there, only coming back for them when I knew the Mass was over. I had always found spending an hour in church unbearably boring, and I was wondering if I would stand the Cardinal's Mass that was to follow the march.

Peace on earth

However, no sooner had the Cardinal arrived than he was at the altar saying Mass. I remember Gregory Alem and I earlier expressing

the fear that, at his age, the Cardinal might not stand the tempo of such a long march; but there he was, still looking strong and preaching peace on earth to men and women of good will.

As I listened to him, he seemed to be talking to me personally. The peace he talked of seemed to be making a home in my mind and in my heart. Since then, I cannot say that I have suddenly become an ideal Christian, but at least I do now feel the urge to lead my family, not only to the church door, but right into the church itself. There, I listen without the urge to glance at my watch. The message of the Gospel has been tickling my heart these days more than at any other time of my life. Even though I will never open my mouth in church to sing for fear of offending whoever may be standing near me, I have always had a weakness for church music which, over the past few months, has been sounding even more splendid than ever before.

God bless the clergy

The Cardinal's march for peace seems to have done me much good. Only the other day, not only did I listen with unusual attention to, but was also profoundly moved by Archbishop Verdzekov's pastoral letter denouncing torture in our land. I remember bowing my head and asking God to bless the Archbishop and the victims of torture in our land. However, I still haven't found the courage to pray for those who order or execute torture, as the Archbishop recommends. How can one ever do that? I wonder.

Not long ago, though, I would never have thought that God could listen to someone like me, and the idea of praying for no less an eminence than an archbishop could never have occurred to me. Maybe the indescribable satisfaction I felt after that prayer is a good indication that the Lord did, after all, listen to His humble servant!

It seems by marching with Christian Cardinal Tumi for peace in our land, I had found that much desired but elusive peace with myself. A prayer for the Cardinal. May he too remember my family and me in his prayers.

I spent a week with the Cistercian monks in Mbengwi

(Reproduced from Cameroon Panorama N^{os}. 385, 386, 387, 388 and 389 of January through May 1994).

The desire to spend a week of rest and meditation with the Cistercian Monks in Mbengwi took root in my mind, in my heart and in my soul in early 1993 after I heeded a call from his Eminence Christian Cardinal Tumi to join him on a “March for Peace” in our country².

Should we join the march?

In fact, the decision to join the Cardinal’s march was not an easy one to take. I remember Maika and I sitting up late at night, after our three kids had gone to bed, wondering whether to participate in it or not. If yes, who should go? The two of us, or just one person?

Our indecision was understandable given the brutality with which the “law-keepers” of this land have so far handled any popular display of discontent with the status quo. Not that long ago, tear-gas canisters and grenades could be heard popping from street corners in Douala like champagne corks, leaving in their wake pavements caked by blood that had oozed from shattered limbs and split skulls.

Strange hearse

I was once a witness to the strangest ‘hearse’ that has perhaps ever been paraded anywhere: a wheel-barrow, bearing a young chap, way below his teens, struck down by a murderous bullet from a trigger-happy policeman’s pistol. That ‘hearse’ was being riotously escorted around town by a crowd of bloodshot-eyed, bare-chested, sweat-soaked kids, many of them foaming at the mouth, and loudly daring nervous, gun-totting soldiers to stop them. That was indeed a frightening scene in a land that has always prided itself as an oasis of peace in a mercurial sub-region prone to instability.

That is why the Cardinal's call for a march for peace caused us such anxiety. We both would have liked to join, but, we wondered, what if it turned out ugly and bloody? Wouldn't it be foolish, at this time when responsible parenthood is an expression that is so warm on everyone's lips, for a mother and a father to abandon their kids in the house to walk together into what had virtually become a battleground?

Sacrificial lamb

Those were some of the searching questions we had to wrestle with before finally deciding that I should go alone. If any mishap were to happen to me -- God forbid! -- Maika would then have to join the increasing class of widows that some people's greed for power was daily creating in this land.

It turned out -- thank God! -- that there was no violence at all. There was not even an armed, riot-shielded police force anywhere in sight; just one mammoth crowd, the largest I have seen anywhere in this land, and I have seen some crowd-pulling events here in Douala lately. A crowd, armed not with politically-marinated, slogan-studded placards, but with the simple armour of prayers and hymns of praise to the Lord Almighty.

Five hours and nearly 30 kilometres later, with the gruelling Douala sun and heat enveloping us like foam, the impossible had happened to me; I had stared so long and so deep into my Christian life, or rather what was left of it, that I took a firm decision to run back for shelter under the protective canopy of Mother Church, that is One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic, and universal in its immensity!

Shun falsehood

I remember that a few months after immortalising my impressions of that march in Cameroon Panorama, I was part of a huge crowd of Nso people who had gathered at the Saint Louis' Church grounds in Bonaberi, to meet with His Eminence Christian Cardinal Tumi. In fact, it was a kind of a long-overdue event as the

Nso community in Douala had not yet had the opportunity to meet His Eminence since he arrived in Douala nearly two years earlier.

The occasion had begun with a Pontifical High Mass celebrated by the Cardinal himself, assisted by a number of priests. His Eminence's homily was dedicated to truth. Seek the truth and shun falsehood, he urged the attentive congregation.

He regretted that falsehood had already made such deep inroads into the very fabric of the Cameroonian society that many have come to accept it as a normal part of life. He cited the simple example of age in Cameroon today. Ask any one his/her age, the Cardinal said, and the likely answer would be: "My official or school age is ..., my true age is ...". The situation has already become so ridiculous, his Eminence continued, that some children are now even officially older than their parents! The congregation greeted this with much mirth.

Joy in heaven

It was after that light-hearted but profound homily that the Cardinal called me to his side. He had, he said, read my impressions of the march I had with him in Cameroon Panorama and had enjoyed it immensely. I said I felt flattered by his observation. He then wondered if I had ever read the Confessions of Saint Augustine as my writing sounded much like his. When the answer was negative, he promised he would get me a copy, which he did some months later.

I remember Maika and I paying him a courtesy visit later, and I wondered how someone like me, who had had nothing to do with the church and her sacred sacraments for so many years, could do to regain favours in the eyes of the Lord. The Cardinal's response was that there was no specific time for anyone to come back to the bosom of the Lord, and that whenever that happens, there is always much rejoicing in heaven because one soul has repented.

Write to the monks

I took the Cardinal's answer in my hand and decided to look for a calm, isolated place to reflect on it. I was wondering where to go

when a colleague of mine, Ms Lucia Nnam Chuo, suggested I try the Monastery in Mbengwi. She said she went there frequently, and that for meditation, prayers and spiritual counselling, I was not likely to find a better place than that. She then gave me the address of her “Spiritual Father”, Reverend Father Pius Okoye, himself a monk.

Care-free days

I had, of course, heard of people spending time in Mbengwi, but had never thought that I would one day be a candidate myself. I remember going to that monastery once back in the seventies, to buy a wedding cake for my brother. The monks then had a reputation for making particularly good but inexpensive pastry.

In those days, I considered those monks a bunch of crazy people who had fled the reality of daily life to hide in the hills of Mbengwi. Bamenda town then was really a place to be in. What with those countless night clubs and bars where live brass bands held you spell bound on the slippery floor for hours on end, with multi-coloured bulbs gyrating on the ceiling and bathing the turbulent, sweat-soaked crowd on the floor in a rainbow of colours! One of those bars in particular – I believe it was called “Happy Day Bar” – was a favourite spot for many of us, from the University of Yaoundé on holiday in town. University students of those days were “swimming” in cash which they spent with astonishing lavishness.

I remember a certain musician, who played in the band in that bar had, as one of his credentials, which he loudly brandished to anyone who cared to listen, the mere fact that he had once played in a band in Bangui, and claimed to speak fluent Lingala, or some such language. For that fact alone, he felt superior to every other musician in town, and drank considerable beer; at our expense, of course.

Crime-free town

Life in Bamenda town was throbbing with much excitement, the town being virtually crime-free, and you could go and come as you wished, well into the early hours of the morning.

That was why I could not understand why anyone would give up that life for what looked to me like the drab, cold and depressingly quiet life of the monastery. I was in my early twenties then, and always had many unprintable things to say whenever the bells of the Big Mankon church disturbed my morning sleep, our house being located in Metta Quarters, less than half-a-mile away. Irony or ironies, nearly twenty years later, I was back to the same monastery, no longer the free-spirited, I-don't-give-a-damn young man of those days, but a humble father of a family, already subdued by the slings and buffets of age, more confused now than ever before, and seeking solace in what someone has called “the deep pool of spiritual quietness”; a mere prodigal in quest of spiritual nourishment. The same people I had dismissed as sheer fugitives from reality, were the ones I was now turning to for quietude and reflection.

Monastery, cold and silent

My brother, Kenjo, and my sister-in-law, Joan, accompanied me to Mbengwi on a rainy, cold and windy Sunday afternoon of August 1, 1993. As we approached the monastery, that massive structure stared at us, cold, silent, and sealed from the outside. A note on the door warned us that since that Sunday was the first of that month, stricter silence was required. The silence was not only strict, it was truly profound.

Kenjo gave a buzz on the door. A few minutes later, keys rattled in the keyhole, and the door flung open, revealing a strongly-built, tall, white monk with neatly cropped hair, a clean chin and eyes that darted here and there behind a pair of thick, horn-rimmed glasses.

Invitation to benediction

After the habitual hellos! I showed him a letter from Father Pius. “Hello, Martin, I’m Brother William, the Guest Master”, he said with a smile. “I’ve been expecting you. Come right in”. He held the door open for us and we walked in. He asked if we would like to join them in church since it was already benediction time. The answer being affirmative, he said he would show me to my room later, and then led

the way up a flight of stairs and out at the back to the church some one hundred metres or so away.

The beauty of your hymns

What immediately struck me as I took a seat in the small chapel was the deep silence reigning therein. The altar section was very spacious, the altar itself occupying the central position. A line of chairs ran along the walls, with three others, bigger and more comfortable, occupying the mid section, which I rightly guessed would be for the officiating priests. The church walls were surprisingly bare; instead of the colourful, saint-studded window-panes one usually associates with churches, what I was gazing at were just plain window-panes that let in a bright, but austere light.

I was still exploring the bare walls of the church with my eyes when the deep bellows of an organ suddenly fell from the other side of the church that was shielded off from the lay section by a wall. I felt like pushing away that wall to unveil the organ, which had by now intensified in strength, rising up in pleasantly soothing waves.

For the one week I was to spend in the monastery, I came to look forward to that music with intense eagerness. Listening to those monks sing, I could understand what Saint Augustine meant when he wrote: “I wept at the beauty of your hymns, and I was profoundly moved at the sweet sound of your Church’s singing. Those sounds flowed into my ears, and the truth streamed into my heart. My feeling of devotion overflowed, and the tears ran from my eyes, and I was happy in them”³.

Benediction and terror

There was a flurry of movements from the other side of the wall and the music suddenly fell silent. Then the monks began to walk out onto the open altar section, one after the other, taking their seats along the wall. They were all dressed in white cassocks with cowls attached to the back of the neck. Then five or six priests arrived and the Chief Celebrant began the service.

Benediction and terror have always held hands in my mind. The reason dates back to the early 60s when, as a young altar boy, I served benediction under a Dutch priest of the Mill Hill Congregation, nicknamed “Fara Nji”. May eternal rest be his!

I have never known how he got his nickname, but the mere mention of it sent tremors down the spines of many people in my village. “Fara Nji” was indeed the incarnation of brutality. I was a witness on several occasions to some truly disturbing and humiliating kicks he took delight in giving to the behinds of even elderly men and women whom we venerated for the wisdom which their ages conferred on them. I once saw him slap an old woman just because she happened to have smiled near him, and he didn’t seem to have liked her kolanut-stained teeth! I know of more than one person who received such humiliating treatment, walked out of church and never ever looked back again.

“Fara Nji” probably never heard this wise advice the saintly Redemptorist priest, Father Francis Xavier Seelos, once gave to a young priest, an advice that is perhaps more relevant today than it was then: “The priest who is rough with the people does injury both to himself and to others. Thousands reject the Church and perish in eternity simply because they have been badly treated by a priest”⁴.

Fara Nji stubbed his foot

One day, a friend and I were serving benediction under “Fara Nji”. It was my role to pick up the cushion on which he was kneeling whenever he stood up to go up to the altar. In those days, the priest and the altar boys kneeled backing the congregation during services. I was apparently distracted because I didn’t realise the priest was already up. My friend, realising my inattention, bent down to pick up the cushion himself. It was precisely at that moment that I recovered from my reverie and also reached for it. As we tugged on both ends of that doughy cushion, “Fara Nji” stubbed his foot on it and almost landed nose first on the floor. Shocked surprise rippled through the congregation as he swung round in fury to face me.

I remember my teeth chattering in my mouth as I clenched them hard in anticipation of the blow I knew would not fail to come. Had “Fara Nji” not been known to administer violent kicks to people’s behinds for much less “offences”? However, to everyone’s surprise, he merely grunted, stared at me in suppressed anger for what seemed to me an eternity, before walking up to the altar. When I managed to stand up from where I was kneeling, my knees nearly wobbled under me. On my forehead, stood visible beads of sweat, and I could feel some of it coursing down my neck. Even later in the sacristy, I still expected to be beaten, but when nothing happened, “Fara Nji” deciding to ignore me with a royal disdain, news went round the village that the man might, after all, be growing old. Who had ever heard of such a thing? “Fara Nji” missing a golden opportunity to land a well-aimed kick to anyone’s behind? No! No!, people said, shaking their heads in utter disbelief. Age, everyone seemed to agree, was beginning to play tricks with him.

Nostalgic yearnings

From every indication, however, it would seem not everyone in my village hated or feared “Fara Nji”. Just only a few months ago, my brother Bongfen and I met one of his classmates of those days, who expressed regret that the type of discipline “Fara Nji” had imposed on the Church had been eroded by sloppy neglect. Loudly pronouncing “Fara Nji” a saint, this fellow, who is himself notorious in our village for senseless acts of violence, asked me if I had been to church lately. When I said I had, he asked if I wasn’t appalled by what he called the ‘market atmosphere’ that has taken hold of the church these days. Swaying from side to side under the weight of alcohol, he declared the church these days a mess, loudly regretting that there was no longer any priest around with “Fara Nji’s” stamina “to beat sense” into the heads of church-goers. So, while some of us quiver at the mere thought of the ‘blood and iron’ Bismarckian discipline of those days, someone yearns for it!

A ceremony steeped in gentleness

I believe my misadventure with “Fara Nji” was the last time I attended benediction until the other day at the monastery. That must have been why just prior to that benediction service, I still felt the jitters of that Sunday evening, well over thirty years before. I could still see the stern contours of “Fara Nji’s” face in the fading horizon of my mind, staring at me with repressed rage.

However, the monastic benediction was a complete contrast to “Fara Nji’s”. The chief celebrant, Father Clement, officiated over a ceremony steeped in unbelievable gentleness, humility and grace. Every gesture bore the weight of meticulous tenderness. This feeling was intensified by the music that almost brought tears to my eyes.

My room

After the ceremony, Kenjo and Joan left and I stood alone looking round the small guest room I occupied. What struck me immediately was the spartan austerity around me: the furniture, the curtains on the window, the small camp-like bed, the bedding, the reading table, the chair, the small sink at the corner, the towel, etc., were all impeccably clean, but that was a cleanliness that bore the weight of age. You couldn’t help feeling that you were indeed in very humble surroundings.

The house rules, which Brother William had given me earlier, stressed silence as the golden rule. They identified the congregation hosting me as a Cloistered, Contemplative Order that seeks encounter with God through silence. No radio or tape-recorder was allowed without headphones.

Meeting Monsignor Hishon

I was still surveying my room when a gong went for the evening meal. I had been told to expect that gong three times a day: at 8 a.m. for breakfast, 12:30 p.m. for lunch, and 7 p.m. for dinner. I went to the Guest House refectory a few feet away and saw a long table around which stood several chairs. Already seated and waiting for me were Monsignor Ron Hishon of Small Mankon, and a young boy he

introduced as his altar boy. Had they come together? I wondered. No, I was told the young lad had been there a few days before, but Monsignor Hishon had just come in as well. I was, of course, meeting him for the first time. He said he had been ill and had been unable to accompany the other priests of the Bamenda Archdiocese who had earlier gone to Bambui for a retreat. He had therefore decided to come to Mbengwi both to rest and, at the same time, have his own retreat.

I expressed surprise that there were still English priests working in Cameroon and, I believe, he said there were two of them here. Asked how long he has been here, he said he had come to Cameroon in the seventies on a special arrangement between his Bishop and the Archbishop of Bamenda. He had gone back home and had been sent to head a seminary in the northern Spanish city of Valladolid.

Murdered for their faith

I was surprised to hear that the English have a seminary in Spain. Monsignor Hishon said that as Catholics were being persecuted in the England of those days, the idea came up to establish seminaries abroad. Those who wished to pursue seminary studies either went to Rome or to Spain. Unfortunately, many of them went back home as priests only to be put to death shortly thereafter. There is, if I recall what he said correctly, a list of martyrs, former students of that seminary, on the seminary wall.

We had much to talk about Spain, a country I had also lived in for a year back in the seventies, when I was a student of Spanish studies at the “Universidad Complutense” in Madrid. I had visited the city of Valladolid on my way to the historic cathedral of Santiago de Compostela where for centuries, pilgrims trooped to visit the grave of Saint James. Needless to say that my interest in those days was purely academic, since, as a student of Spanish art, I was required to make a pilgrimage to that cathedral, as to many others throughout Spain, including numerous fabulous mosques studding Spain, legacies of centuries of Moorish domination of the Iberian Peninsular.

Restless in silence

My first night at the monastery was not an easy one. Instructions required that all guests be back in their rooms by 8:30 p.m. I had no radio, no television, and no telephone. I didn't mind the absence of television since I hardly ever watch Cameroon television anyway, but I always listen to the radio, mainly foreign radio stations: the BBC, VOA, etc. I missed the telephone as I would have liked to call home to find out how Maika and the kids were doing.

I was restless in that silence, which was so thick you could reach out and grab it with your hand. I glanced at my watch every five minutes, wondering if I would ever be able to sleep. To make matters worse, the unforgiving weather planted a violent cough in my chest and blocked my nostrils with a stubborn cold that stayed with me for the week I was there.

Finding the Lord in silence

I paced up and down my small room that was enveloped in a thick foam of silence. I looked at my watch again. Only 9:30! I almost swore obscenely, but remembered just in time where I was. I picked up the Confessions of Saint Augustine and began to read.

Barely half an hour later, my mind began to wander again. If only there was a phone, I thought, I would call home. From the din of Douala, a city that never sleeps, to the deep silence of Mbengwi; boy, what a world of a difference!

My eyes strayed up the wall to the crucifix. I stared at it intensely for a while and suddenly had the uneasy feeling that the Lord could just unhook Himself, climb down from there, and sit opposite me. I took fright and quickly left the table to sit on the small camp bed. When I later reflected on my action, I thought it was truly ironic that I could be searching for the Lord, for that is what I was doing, and yet shy away from the mere thought of Him coming to sit by me! I have read of people who spend hours on their knees yearning for the Lord to come to them. That my first reaction was to run away from Him was perhaps an indication that I still had a long way to go in my spiritual quest.

Vigil

It looked as if I was in bed for barely thirty minutes when the church bell rang. I turned on the lights and looked at my watch. What! 2:15 in the morning! What in the world would these people be ringing the bell at that ungodly hour for? I nearly shouted, to no one in particular.

But then, the gentle breeze began to float into my room, bringing with it the soothing music from the melodious voices of the monks. It was as limpid and pure as the cold air around me. It felt like a soothing balm on my anger. I sat up listening to it, but despite its magnetic appeal, I still felt too weak to stand up and join the monks in church as I would have loved to do. Satan seemed to be standing resolutely tall and insurmountable on my way, fanning my eyes back to sleep.

Later that day, I could not help asking Father Pius why anyone would dare wake up that early in the morning. He responded that the monks always kept a vigil in the early hours of the morning. Didn't I know, he asked, that monumental events always happen at night? The Lord's birth, his sufferings prior to his crucifixion, darkness enveloping the world when the Lord died, etc. So, each night, the monks keep a vigil in anticipation of the Lord's return.

Morning Mass

That morning, the church bell again rang out at 6:15. I sat in the pew with three other people listening to the refreshingly soothing sound of the music from the choir hidden from view by the wall. The lingering anger from the previous night was slowly receding, being peeled away by the enthralling sound of the music that was inviting my soul to prepare itself for Holy Mass, with its symbolic re-enactment of the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus, the Lamb of God, for the salvation of mankind.

The music suddenly fell silent and the monks began to walk up to the altar, one after the other, slowly, wearily and silently. I was immediately struck by the long, voluminous arms of their gowns that

seemed to stretch right to the ground. I could guess that those arms helped to keep their hands and arms warm in the cold weather.

Shortly thereafter, five or six priests, including Monsignor Hishon, walked up to the altar, kissed it in turn and took their seats by the wall. They were followed by the chief celebrant, Father Clement, a man of medium height with a slight stoop in his gait. He sported an impeccably white beard and behind his dark, horn-rimmed glasses, a pair of limpidly clear eyes stared searchingly at you.

I marvelled at the clarity of his voice as he invited all of us to prepare ourselves for Holy Mass by calling to mind our sins. Throughout the Mass, I was struck by his simple, unhurrying gestures that were at the same time so majestically moving. He lifted up every word with care and respect, leaving you in no doubt that those words came from the bottom of his heart.

Distractions

I had never seen Mass anywhere said with such solemnity. The impression I usually have in most churches is that the priests want to get it over with as quickly as possible so as to rush off to “more urgent matters” elsewhere.

On several instances during that Mass, I was a victim of distractions. I couldn’t help regretting that there was no phone for me to call home. I even caught myself wondering how best to describe the scene I was witnessing. The writer in me seemed to be wondering with the Psalmist how best to make “my tongue the pen of a ready writer” (Ps:45:1).

Distractions in church have always posed a particular problem to me. I remember walking past a beauty parlour one day and, to my astonishment, there was a man I knew very well sitting among women, a hair-dryer sitting like a pot upside-down his head. Frankly, I had never known men too could be admitted into such places! The next day, I went to church and saw the gentleman walk in. From that moment until the Mass ended, I couldn’t think of anything else, but

of him sitting under a dryer, among women; a particularly shocking sight that seemed, I couldn't say why, to hurt my pride as a man.

I was worried of the increasing distractions I was facing, but then I recalled that no less an eminence than Saint Augustine himself had also been a victim of such distractions in prayers:

“When my heart becomes the receptacle of distractions ... and the container for a mass of empty thoughts, then too my prayers are often interrupted and distracted; and in your sight, while I am directing the voice of my heart to your ears, frivolous thoughts somehow rush in and cut short an inspiration of the deepest importance”⁵.

The value of silence

One of the things that struck me with the Mass at the monastery was the place of silence. After the reading of the Gospel, and shortly after Holy Communion, everyone sits down, head bowed for what looks like an eternity. No one moves. Time itself seems to suspend its flight for that length of time.

In those moments, I thought of what Doctor Norman Vincent Peale, the great American exponent of positive thinking, once wrote about silence: “[It] conditions the mind to those sharper illuminations which surely come from God working in your thoughts. Divine guidance is always spoken in a still, small voice. You can scarcely hear it in confusion – certainly not in excited panic, nor when your mind is filled with anxiety. You cannot perceive God’s will in the midst of noise, (...) especially noise within”⁶.

As I watched that row of bowed heads, I wondered what could be going through their minds. Were they like me whose mind kept rushing back to my family in Douala, or had they disciplined their own minds so well that they could zoom them exclusively on the Lord?

That “deep pool of spiritual quietness” brought to mind the words of Saint Augustine: “Let us leave a little room for reflection, room too for silence. Enter into yourself, and leave behind all noise and confusion. Look within yourself. See whether there is some

delightful hidden place in your consciousness where you can be free from noise and argument, where you need not be carrying on your disputes and planning to have your own stubborn way. Hear the word in quietness, that you may understand it” (Sermon 52, 22).

Confession

After Mass that first day, Father Pius came to see me. He had met me briefly the previous evening and had inquired about my faith. I had told him that what was left of it was probably not worth talking about. He had smiled and told me not to worry, that many had been there before, like me, and that prayers and reflection had healed their souls. He didn’t see why that would not happen to me as well. All I had to do was trust the Lord and He would work wonders for me, as He always does for anyone who runs to him.

He then recommended that I read Luke Chapter 5, the story of the lost sheep, the lost drachma and the prodigal son. Going through it, I recalled what Cardinal Tumi had told me several weeks before of rejoicing in heaven at the repentance of a lost soul.

Father Pius also brought other reading material, especially on confession and the rosary. He talked to me lengthily about the origin of such prayers as “Hail Mary” and Our Lord’s Prayer, situating each of them within the tradition of the church. We discussed confession and its significance in depth, and he recommended I prepare myself for confession by reviewing the literature he had given me on it. That was going to be my first confession in perhaps well over one quarter of a century, and I was somewhat nervous about it.

As I went down on my knees before that simple monk that Monday evening, I felt so unworthy of the care he was taking to cure my soul from so many years of neglect of the Lord. On my knees before him, I saw the contrast between us, standing out stark and bare. While I am a man of the world, who would rather listen to music, or read poetry than pray, he is a man who has dedicated his entire life to God. I could see the details of his hands roughened by hard work in the fields or in one of the workshops. I had been told that the monks consider ordinary labour too as part of their prayers.

Holy Communion

The next morning, I looked forward to Holy Mass with some excitement. It reminded me of the first time, well over three decades ago, when I had, for the first time, stuck out my tongue and “Fara Nji” had placed Holy Communion on it. My friends and I held Holy Communion in an awe that bordered on terror. We had all heard of what was said to have happened to a certain woman who had received the host and had surreptitiously taken it out of her mouth and taken it home to her “pagan” neighbours. One of them, we were told, had playfully thrown it on the fire and the whole house is said to have suddenly been engulfed in blood, threatening to drown the occupants. The panicky neighbours are said to have rushed to the parish priest, who came and blessed the blood-filled house, and when the blood receded, retrieved the host from the fire, where it was said to have lain, sparkling like a star.

That morning at the monastery, well over three decades later, I still felt the weight of that legend on me as I waited for Father Clement to place the host on my tongue. In fact, I was so eager to receive it that my tongue was already dangling out of my mouth long before the priest arrived. I did not even remember to acknowledge with an “Amen” when the good priest reminded me that I was about to receive the body of Christ Himself.

I rushed back to my seat, cherishing the flavour of the host that had, for one strange reason or another, decided to stick like gum onto my palate. I remember having to wiggle my tongue with some tact before dislodging it from there. I couldn’t help wondering if that was not what might have happened to the lady in the aforementioned story.

Shedding tears

What happened to me thereafter could best be described as a “miracle”. I am not someone who is unnecessarily sentimental and if someone else had told me an experience like this, I would have dismissed it as sheer sentimentalism. However, after I had succeeded to devour the sacred host, I suddenly felt as if a heavy load had been

lifted off my shoulders. An unbelievable feeling of relief started to descend on me and tears began to flow uncontrollably from my eyes. It was a good thing the few people in church were so immersed in their own prayers that no one saw me shedding tears. I suddenly felt like a “new” member of a family from which I had unwisely excluded myself, and I wept unashamedly.

From that day on, whenever Father Pius came for our daily rosary, those prayers no longer sounded boring and repetitive. Despite the inclement weather and the nasty cold and cough that were exacting much more than their own share of punishment on me, I began to feel as if I belonged to the monastery too. The afternoons I had to myself for prayers and reading passed smoothly, and I remember once being surprised that time could have passed so quickly without my noticing it.

Mass for my family

On Thursday afternoon, the eve of my departure, Father Pius dedicated his usual weekly Thursday afternoon Holy Mass exclusively to my family. I had never before had the privilege of being the centre of so much holy attention, and I felt truly unworthy of it. When I had to leave the next day, I felt I was leaving friends behind, people who had cared for my soul, people who had provided me a quiet corner, far from the noisy din of Douala, to meditate on my salvation.

I left Mbengwi with my mind clear on a number of things. I discovered to my astonishment that the rosary is a prayer that could be said with delight and relative ease. I remember one afternoon after Father Pius had talked to my about the significance of the rosary, I suddenly felt the urge to pray. I picked up the rosary, opened my prayer book, so as not to miss the mysteries and some of the still-unfamiliar prayers, fixed my eyes on the crucifix on the wall, signed myself, and was surprised at how easy and delightful it truly could be to say the rosary.

Prayer for my family

From then on, I remember saying it a few more times, alone. I also realised that to my horror that I had never really included my family in my prayers before – at least, the few times in the past when I had ever bowed my head to pray. To me, providing the material needs and giving them the love a father and a husband should give his family, was enough. In Mbengwi, Father Pius kept asking me to think of my wife and children in my prayers.

It was then that I realised how Lucky I am to have such a wonderful family : a good wife and three strong, healthy children, and I thanked God Almighty for it. I remember also thanking the Lord for giving me a wife who has stuck faithfully by my side, especially when, as someone once said with a poetic flourish, dark clouds of despair had loomed thick and menacing over our heads in foreign lands. It was frightening to come to the sudden realisation that I had never thought of Maika in my prayers before. It took Mbengwi for me to render her that long over-due service.

The Church as a place of reflection

One thing I came to realise in Mbengwi was just how important a place a church is for reflection. I remember walking to the chapel every so often throughout the day, just to be alone with my thoughts, sometimes thoughts that were not always religious in nature. I would sit there just rummaging through my life and I would leave feeling astonishingly relaxed.

Positive thinker, Doctor Normal Vincent Peale, says that the church is « ... a wonderful source of security because this is where people, for générations, have congregated in an effort to bring the health-producing, life-changing laws of God together in a single concentrated expérience. Church worship is much more than a formal duty to perform. (...) It is your exposure to the greatest of all power. In fact, a vital church is the greatest power relay station in existence. Through it flows the vibrant life-changing energy of Almighty God himself »⁷. No truer words have ever been spoken !

The presence of others

Another significant event that happened to me at the monastery was the presence of Monsignor Hishon. I learnt a great deal from him about the Catholic Church in both Europe and Cameroon. We always had time at meals to talk about one aspect of the Church or another, and I came to cherish those discussions immensely.

I also recall the arrival a day before my departure of two members of the Focolare Movement : Demi, a Filipino, from Fontem, and Jean, a Malgache, from Bamenda. From them, I learnt much about their movement, which had organised a recent world-wide télévision programme dubbed « Family Fest ».

Monsignor Hishon and I left Mbengwi the same day. Prior to our departure, I went to his room, went down on my knees and asked him for his blessing, which he readily gave, after a short prayer. So I left Mbengwi steeped in prayers. I felt like a newly minted coin.

Morning prayers.

I remember Father Pius telling me I could now go back to my daughter and tell her that I was now a fullfledged Christian. I had told him that one Saturday I had asked Simolen, my daughter, who seemed unusually reluctant to leave the house, to quickly go to the parish so as not to be late for doctrine classes. She surprised me by asking why I did not go with her to doctrine classes as well. I told her I received Holy Communion several years before. She had then wondered why she had never seen my receiving Holy Communion before. That had come as an unexpected surprise to me and had made me really uncomfortable for many months thereafter. In fact, when I received Holy Communion that morning, I wished she were there to see me. I remember bowing my head down in prayer and asking God to bless her and her two brothers and guide them along the path of righteousness.

One thing I have been doing ever since I left Mbengwi is to wake up each morning with a prayer, thanking God for having kept Watch over my family during the night and asking him to take us into his

hands during the day. That is an advice I took from an anonymous poet who wrote the following enlightening verses :

Every morning, lean thine arms awhile
Upon the window-sill of Heaven,
And gaze upon the Lord ...
Then, with that vision in thy heart,
Turn strong to meet the day.⁸

As I reflect on my one week stay with the Cistercian monks in Mbengwi, I recall the words of Saint Gregory, talking about some poor peasants : « By their example, they keep me fastened to the peaceful shore of prayer whenever I am tossed about by the endless waves of worldly affairs». When the rat race threatens to overwhelm me, I do pose for a moment to think of the Cistercian monks in the hills of Mbengwi. Then a simple prayer pops to mind, and I feel at peace with myself and with the world around me.

1

Come, follow me!

On Sunday, July 24, 2007, the Catholic men of the Douala Archdiocese held the general assembly of the Catholic Men's Association (CMA) at the Our Lady of Annunciation Parish in Bonamoussadi. I was asked to lead the assembly in a bible reading but I preferred to reflect with the group on three words from Sacred Scripture: "Come, follow me!", some of the most frequent words on the lips of our Blessed Lord as he began his public ministry.

Introductory remarks

Generally, during CMA-organised Masses, the priest would often give time for members to go out into the congregation to 'fish out' and bring to the fore, against the background of the beautiful CMA anthem, potential candidates for CMA membership.

The Catholic Women's Association (CWA) has come up with a much more colourful version; the women go out in search of potential members with candles alight; the candles symbolizing Christ, the light of the universe. "I am the light of the world," says the Lord, "anyone who follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (Jn 8:12).

When we take our brothers by the hand and ask them to follow us, we are merely re-enacting what Christ himself did on several occasions at the beginning of his public ministry. He went out in search of faithful followers who would take his message of salvation to the four corners of the earth. Thus, the words: "Come, follow me," became some of the most frequent words our Redeemer pronounced as he screened potential candidates for discipleship; those who would suffer persecution and even martyrdom in his name because he would be sending them out to hostile territory, like sheep among wolves (Mt 10:16).

They must therefore be men of steel will because Christ's enemies would only be too happy and ready to hand them over to the courts to be condemned for their faith; to synagogues for scourging, and to governors and kings to be bound hands and feet and thrown into dungeons for daring to preach his word (Mt. 10: 17-23).

These three words of divine invitation, "Come, follow me!", which still ring in our ears as fresh as when they were pronounced well over two thousand years ago, constitute the subject of our meditation. They have been echoing down the corridors of human ears from one generation to another for centuries, and they still carry the urgency of those early days because then, as now, the harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few (Lk 10:2).

Let us therefore reflect on the Lord's invitation in two phases: first of all, how Christ calls his disciples in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke); and secondly, how he calls them in the Fourth Gospel, the Gospel according to John. In my conclusion, I point out the obligation we all have to extend Christ's invitation "Come, follow me!" to our own brothers and sisters, especially those whose faith has weakened, for one reason or another, or those who have not yet heard our Lord's call to sanctity.

Evangelisation territory

Our Lord's evangelisation territory starts off rather small as he sends his disciples only to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt. 10: 6), which he himself has come to redeem. It would later take the unrelenting persistence and strong faith of a stubborn Canaanite woman, whose daughter is possessed by a demon (Mt 15: 21-28), for our Blessed Lord to start changing his policy of "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." He would later abandon this policy altogether when the said "lost sheep of the house of Israel" reject his message of salvation, thus forcing him, as it were, to turn his full attention to the whole world. It is then that he tells his disciples, and us this day, to "Go out to the whole world; proclaim the Gospel of creation. Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mk 16: 15-17);

“All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28: 18-20).

With such a vast territory to conquer, Christ necessarily needs faithful followers under a strong leadership because the harvest is plentiful, but the harvesters are few (Lk 10:2). The three words, “Come, follow me!”, become the hallmark of our Lord’s command to a select few, a band of timid followers, who are still wondering if they are doing the right thing by following him.

Let us begin with the synoptic gospels. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke are called “synoptic” (from the Greek word which means “seen together” or “seen at a glance”) because of their remarkable similarity to each other. They narrate the events of Christ’s life, including his call of his apostles, in very similar ways.

According to Matthew, Jesus called his first disciples by the Lake of Galilee. “As he was walking by the Lake of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who was called Peter, and his brother Andrew; they were making a cast into the lake with their net, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, ‘Come after me and I will make you fishers of people.’ And at once they left their nets and followed him. Going on from there he saw another pair of brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John; they were in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. And at once, leaving the boat and their father, they followed him” (Mt. 4: 18-22).

The pairs of brothers, Simon and Andrew and the sons of Zebedee, James and John, receive an instant call and respond instantly. The same instant call and prompt reaction characterize Mark’s description of Christ’s call to his first disciples: “As he was walking along by the Lake of Galilee he saw Simon and Simon’s brother Andrew casting a net in the lake – for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, ‘Come after me and I will make you into fishers of people.’ And at once they left their nets and followed him. Going a little further, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John; they too were in their boat, mending their nets. At once he

called them and, leaving their father in the boat with the men he employed, they went after him" (Mk 1: 16-20).

If Matthew and Mark give such a similar account of the call of Christ's first disciples, what does Luke say about it? Saint Luke gives his account a lot more flesh than does Matthew or Mark. Whereas Matthew and Mark show us that Jesus is meeting those he is calling to his service for the first time, Saint Luke tells us that Jesus has already met Simon Peter for some time before extending a formal invitation to him to become his fisher of men: "Leaving the synagogue he went to Simon's house. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in the grip of a high fever, and they asked him to do something for her. Standing over her he rebuked the fever and it left her, and she immediately got up and began to serve them" (Lk 4: 38-39).

Christ's reputation as a miracle-worker is fast gaining ground and people are already asking him for favours. Simon would see so many of such wonders that when some begin to reject Christ and abandon him, finding his teaching too strong for their liking, and Christ asks the Twelve if they too want to go away, it is Simon who makes this wonderful profession of faith: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the message of eternal life, and we believe; we have come to know that you are the Holy One of God" (Jn 6: 68-70).

After the miracle in Simon's house, days go by before our Lord again meets Simon, this time by the Lake of Gennesaret. Saint Luke tells us that the crowd is pressing around him, listening to the word of God, when he catches sight of two boats at the water's edge. "The fishermen had got out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats – it was Simon's – and asked him to put out a little from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat" (Lk 5: 2-3).

Is our Lord's choice of Simon's boat a mere coincidence? I doubt that it is. By performing one of his first recorded miracles at Simon's house, and later choosing Simon's boat to preach from, our Blessed Lord is definitely sending out signals to whoever cares to listen that he has already found the leader of his team. Simon is being 'anointed', as it were, for greater things ahead. The Lord is gradually hewing the

rock on which he will build his Church. It won't be long before he publicly tells Simon: "And I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it" (Mt 16: 18-19).

But, that is still to come; for now, we are still at the early stages of Christ's ministry and Peter's personality is still a little fuzzy in our minds. We can only imagine him also staring dumfounded at our Lord alongside the crowd that is listening to him. He too must be asking himself where this young man has had this type of knowledge from. "They were all amazed and said to one another, 'what is it in his words? He gives orders to unclean spirits with authority and power and they come out.'" (Lk: 4: 36-37).

Word is already reaching beyond the confines of the province about the wonders wrought by our Lord and Simon, who has seen one of our Lord's first miracles performed under his very roof, is also invaded by feelings of wonderment. As Simon is still staring in disbelief, our Lord suddenly turns to him and asks him to cast his net. "Put out into the deep water and pay out your nets for a catch" (Lk 5:4).

Simon Peter, with the rough features of a seasoned fisherman, his face having been beaten by the storms at sea for years on end, knows that sea like the palm of his hand. He and his kid brother, Andrew, and the other companions, James and his brother John, the sons of Zebedee, have struggled all night long but have had to admit defeat and come back home, empty-handed. They were now cleaning their nets to wait patiently for another day, for there would always be another day. So, being asked to pay out his nets must have sounded to Peter like sheer folly; and he would have not hesitated to say so, had the command not come from our Blessed Lord himself.

Simon is beginning to understand that with this young man, anything is possible. Has he not been a witness to some amazing things from his hands not that long ago? Was it not under his very roof that the young teacher rebuked the fever that had grounded his mother-in-law for days? Now that he is asking him to cast his net one more time, who is he not to obey? "Master, we worked hard all night

long and caught nothing, but if you say so, I will pay out the nets” (Lk 5: 5-6).

The “if you say so, I will pay out the nets” is already a mark of submission to a more powerful authority. It is the attitude of a humble man before his Lord. In gratitude, our Blessed Lord rewards him, as he always rewards all who obey him, with another miracle: “And when they had done this they netted such a huge number of fish that their nets began to tear, so they signalled to their companions in the other boat to come and help them; when they came, they filled both boats to sinking point” (Lk 5: 6-7).

It should be noted that it is Simon and his kid brother, Andrew, who invite their friends, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, to come and help them with this amazing catch. By so doing, they win for Jesus those who are to be some of his most devoted followers. That is what we too are called upon to do, my brothers. We should invite others to come to Christ so that together, we can bear witness to his endless miracles.

But, let’s see how Simon reacts to our Lord’s miracle in his boat. The miraculous curing of his mother-in-law a few days previously is still fresh in his mind. Then comes the miracle of the fish and he can take it no more. He and Andrew, his kid brother, and his other companions, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, are “completely awestruck” (Lk 5:9). The evangelist tells us that “When Simon Peter saw this he fell at the knees of Jesus saying, “leave me, Lord; I am a sinful man” (Lk 5: 8-9). This is already a great sign of what kind of leader Peter is going to be to his flock; a leader steeped in humility; a man with what Archbishop Fulton Sheen calls “a deep sense of his unworthiness,” a true mark of greatness in a leader, who will serve his flock, rather than wait for his flock to serve him.

Seeing how confused Peter is, our Lord quickly stretches out his hand to rescue him, as he will on several other occasions in the three years they will spend together. “Do not be afraid,” he tells him, “from now on it is people you will be catching. Then, bringing their boats back to land they left everything and followed him.” (Lk 5: 10). That’s the same message Christ is still giving us today. “Pay out your

net among your brothers and sisters. Do not be afraid. I am with you. I will protect you.”

We have, my brothers in Christ, seen the remarkable similarity in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, on how Christ called his first disciples, the pairs of brothers, Simon and Andrew, and the Zebedee brothers, James and John. We have also seen how Luke gives his own version a little more flesh than the other two evangelists. Let us now see how John treats the same call in what has come to be known as the Fourth Gospel.

Christ's call as seen and heard by John

Let's begin with a brief review of how John differs from the synoptics. A number of features differentiate John's Gospel from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. John is much more concerned than the synoptics to bring out the significance of the events of Christ's life and of all that he did and said. He is also far more interested than the synoptics in worship and sacraments. His is a much more complex work and gives more details of Christ's life.

Now, how does John see Christ's call of his first followers? The answer is seen in John Chapter 1: 35-51. First, we are told that Jesus' first followers were first of all John the Baptist's disciples. As Jesus is walking by, John the Baptist, who baptised him a day before, very much against his will since he felt that he is not fit to untie the thongs of Christ's sandals (Lk 3: 16), points him out to his followers, in these words: "Look there is the Lamb of God" (Jn 1:36). That pricks the young men's curiosity and they decide to follow Jesus. He turns round, sees them following him and asks: 'What do you want?' They answer, 'Rabbi – which means Teacher – 'where do you live?' (Jn 1: 38-39); and then comes the divine invitation: 'Come and see!' They go with him, see where he lives, and stay with him all day (Jn 1: 39-40).

One of these young men is Andrew, who can hardly wait to find his elder brother, Simon, to bring him to the Lord: Anyone who truly finds the Lord cannot keep the joy to himself. He has to share it; and that is what Andrew does. He hurries to his elder brother and tells

him: “We have found the Messiah” (Jn 1:40), and then takes him to Jesus. I can almost hear Andrew urging his reluctant and perhaps sceptical elder brother to “come and see.” And Simon perhaps thinking to himself: “Oh, these young people are always excited over nothing. Okay, I’ll go and see but knowing Andrew, I won’t be surprised if I don’t find anything exciting about this guy at all. But, it doesn’t hurt to go and see.”

That is what we are being called to do this day, my brothers. “Tell our own sister and brother -- even the most reluctant ones -- that ‘we have found the Messiah’” and lead them too to Jesus, as Andrew does his brother. A remarkable thing then happens. Christ takes one look at Peter and immediately calls him by name. He does not ask Peter his name, he simply says: “You are Simon son of John; you are to be called Cephas – which means Rock” (Jn 1:42). Christ, the Saviour, the Co-Creator of the world with his Father, knows us all by name. As the prophet Jeremiah reminds us: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you” (Jer 1: 5). We see Peter already being singled out as the Rock on which our Blessed Lord will build his Church. (You’ve probably heard the Latin expression “Ubi Petrus, ibi ecclesia” – where there is Peter, there is the Church of Christ.) So the Rock on which Christ builds his Church comes to our Lord through his kid brother, Andrew. What a lesson for us all!

The next day, Jesus meets Philip as he is leaving Galilee and invites him to follow him. With no hesitation at all, Philip follows him. The excitement of having been touched by divine grace is so intense that Philip decides to share his joy, and he goes out in search of others. There is a beautiful exchange between Philip and his friend, Nathanael (Bartholomew). Philip tells him, “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and the prophets wrote, Jesus Son of Joseph, from Nazareth,” (Jn 1:45-46).

But, like many of us, Nathanael is a victim of the stereotype syndrome. He judges people from outward appearances or from their origin. Stereotyping, of which we are all guilty, distorts the picture we have of people. It reduces us to narrow-minded tribal loyalists, regionalists, racists or trumpeters of ethnic intolerance. The question

Nathanael asks shows that he is merely putting everyone from Nazareth into one basket and dismissing them as worthless. That is why he is astonished that anyone can admire what comes from Nazareth. “From Nazareth? Can anything good come from Nazareth?” (Jn 46-47, he asks, his voice steeped in disbelief.

What I find remarkable about Philip, my brothers, is his refusal to indulge in fruitless polemics. He probably knows his friend well enough not to argue with him. Nathanael is probably the type who finds it difficult to change his mind, especially about people from remote and backward villages, like Nazareth. That must be why he finds it difficult to understand why his friend, Philip, is so fussy about a man from Nazareth. For his part, Philip thinks it better to simply invite his friend to “Come and see” and then make up his own mind by himself.

All this while, our Blessed Lord is beckoning Nathanael to come to him. He has obviously heard the discussion between the two friends and is calling them to come to Him, the Omniscient, the Omnipresent, the Omnipotent. What happens when they do come to him? Instead of getting angry at Nathanael for his negative view of him and his village, as many of us would be in a similar situation, our Blessed Lord has only words of praise for him. As soon as he sees Nathanael, he says: “There, truly, is an Israelite in whom there is no deception.” (Jn 1: 47). Nathanael is astonished, as we all would be, I guess, and asks “How do you know me?” (Jn 1: 48).

Oh, what a question to ask our Blessed Lord! From that question, it is clear that we are still in the presence of a soul that has not yet encountered the marvels of the Lord. Peter and the others, who have seen our Lord at work, who have witnessed the miracles our Lord has performed so far, would not ask such a question. Our Blessed Lord simply tells him “Before Philip came to call you, I saw you under the fig tree” (Jn 1:48-49). And what follows is the true encounter of a receptive soul to the saving grace of the Master. Nathanael, now completely dumbfounded, as had been Peter and his companions earlier, gives one of the first, if not the first, public recognitions of Christ as the Son of God in Sacred Scripture:

“Rabbi,” he says, his voice dripping with astonishment, “you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel” (Jn 1: 49-50). And our Lord tells him, “You believe that just because I said: I saw you under the fig tree. You are going to see greater things than that. (...). In truth I tell you, you will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending over the Son of Man,” (Jn 1: 50-51).

Conclusion

In this short reflection, my brothers in Christ, we have met some of those who are to travel with Christ throughout the three years of his public ministry. Our Blessed Lord calls each of them by name and in the state in which he meets them. The same holds true for us, he calls us in the state in which he finds us. He does not ask us to become someone else. No, he merely asks us to shed our old ways and embrace the new, that is, the doctrine of love, which we should spread around us. Christ is asking us to invite others, as Andrew invites his elder brother Simon, and Philip, his friend Nathanael, to “come and see” and hear him.

Christ’s followers are not necessarily people who think or act alike. We can still think differently, vote for different candidates in elections, militate in different political parties and still carry Christ’s message of love to the whole world. After all, Christ’s early followers came from different backgrounds.

In fact, you couldn’t find a much more heterogeneous bunch of people than Christ’s apostles. They include sceptics (like Thomas, the Twin), barely literate fishermen (Peter), scholarly tax collectors (Matthew), seasoned writers (John), impatient and violently anti-Roman nationalists (Simon the Zealot), among others. There is even a traitor among them, Judas Iscariot, whose feet our Lord washes, but who turns round and sells his Master for thirty pieces of silver.

The case of Matthew, the publican, and Simon, the Zealot, is worth mentioning. Whereas Matthew, by his trade as a tax collector, is widely shunned as a traitor to his people, since he collects taxes for a despised foreign power, Simon, the Zealot, is a virulent anti-Roman combatant, who is ready to use violence to overthrow the foreign

yoke. He must, like Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus, be dreaming that Christ would be the one to liberate Israel from the Roman yoke (Lk 24: 21).

This leaves one wondering why our Blessed Lord would choose such two diametrically opposed individuals as his companions! In his beautiful book, *Life of Christ* (p. 113), Archbishop Fulton Sheen says that Christ might have chosen Simon the Zealot “because of his wholehearted enthusiasm for a cause.” If he carries that enthusiasm into the defence of the new faith, Christianity would certainly thrive in hostile environments.

Whether we are political activists, soldiers, tax collectors, “*bayam sellams*”, or even highway robbers, our Lord is asking us to “come, follow him” into his vineyard. After receiving the grace of salvation, we should then go out in search of others. The divine invitation “Come, follow me” still resounds in our ears everyday. We are still being urged to come and follow the Lord, not alone, but with our brothers and sisters in the light of what the Apostles Andrew and Philip did. This is far from being an easy task, but with Christ’s Advocate, the Holy Spirit, guiding us, everything is possible, “for nothing is impossible for God” (Lk 1:37). May our Blessed Lord continue to inspire us in our evangelisation mission. Amen.

Foyer de la Charité, an oasis of silence in Bonjongo

On one of the hills protruding like a finger from the side of the majestic Mount Fako snugly sits the first ever Catholic Church west of the Mungo, the historic German-built Bonjongo Queen of the Angels Church, surrounded by a breath-taking scenery, an amazing panoramic view that stretches all the way to Malabo in Equatorial Guinea across the bay from Victoria.

Nestling at the foot of this hill, and well within its shadow, sits a rectangular structure that looks more like a nunnery than the retreat house that it really is. Previously built as a formation house for the Buea diocesan congregation, the Brothers of Saint Martin de Porres, this structure has since the year 2000 been serving as a diocesan retreat house, under the French name: “Foyer de la Charité”.

Father Jude Thaddeus Mbi, who now chaperons this small community, chuckles gleefully as he reads the address on an envelope before him. “Anglophones have a hard time spelling this name: ‘Foyer’ correctly. One sees all kinds of spellings; see this one,” he says, brandishing the address on an envelope that would make even the most liberal member of the French Academy, that watchdog of the purity of the French language, collapse in fright.

Bed-ridden founder

But why would anyone blame Anglophones for butchering this French name, given that a French structure of this nature seems a little out of place in the Diocese of Buea in English-speaking Cameroon? Father Jude says this community is the brainchild of the late Emeritus Bishop, His Lordship Pius Suh Awa, who brought it from one of his visits to Molière’s country. The community itself was founded by a French visionary, mystic and stigmatist, Marthe Robin. Born in 1902, she was a sickly child, who became bed-ridden at the age of 18 with paralysis on both legs. Ten years later, at the age of 28, she suffered total paralysis and was confined to bed for over fifty

years, during which time she lost her ability to drink, eat, or, amazingly, even sleep. What was so miraculous about her, Father Jude continues, was the fact that she only ate the Blessed Sacrament once a week, for the rest of her earthly life.

At another stage in her life, she received the five wounds of our Blessed Lord and each Thursday she would suffer the Passion of Christ up till the following Sunday, and sometimes even beyond Sunday. For over fifty years, she suffered the loss of blood from her wounds. It was a miracle that she could lose so much blood in her already emaciated condition and still survive. As word of her condition spread, people began to flock to her home at Châteauneuf-le-Galaure in the French region of La Drôme, seeking her prayers and even advice on their own lives. Strange to see a bedridden woman being sought after by able-bodied men and women for advice on how to live their lives! Father Jude shakes his head in disbelief.

A priest, a must

He tells her story with a passion. Our Lady, he says, appeared to their founder on several occasions, and so did our Blessed Lord, who asked her to do something very new in the world. When she asked what it was, he asked her to found a “Foyer” of light, charity and love, where our Blessed Lord’s heart would dwell to welcome and assuage all souls seeking peace. She then wondered how that could be, given that she was bedridden. Our Lord then told her he would be sending her a priest, whose main apostolate would be to organise and preach retreats.

On February 10, 1936, a certain Father Georges Finet came to her, like everyone else, either for advice or out of sheer curiosity, and was then told that it was him the Lord had chosen to serve the new community as its pioneer priest. He then began to give five-full day retreats that became known as “Fundamental Retreats”, covering the whole of Catholic teachings, to enable participants discover what Catholic faith is all about. That is why the community cannot function without a full-time priest, entirely dedicated to retreats.

Asked if such retreats are limited to Catholics, Father Jude gives a categorical No! “People of other faith, especially Presbyterians, come here too. In fact, the other day one of them surprised me with a call, telling me she had thoroughly enjoyed the retreat she attended and that she was planning to come back another day, God willing. She did not become a Catholic, which is not our aim, but her faith simply intensified after her stay with us. And that is really our mission, that is, deepen people’s faith through evangelisation. Faith can never be exhausted. For those who come to us without faith, we pray that they may leave us with it; for those with faith, we pray that it may be reinforced. We’re always learning something new about our faith. That’s our mission: preach the faith, in season and out of season,” Father Jude said.

Father Richard Chin, pioneer priest

Further asked if he (Father Jude) was the pioneer priest of the “Foyer” in Bonjongo, he says, “Oh no, you must have heard of Father Richard Chin. He was the pioneer priest; the bishop sent him for training at our Mother House in France and he returned to start this house here. Unfortunately, the Lord called him home too soon and quite unexpectedly. Thereafter, this place remained without a priest for about two years and it was in 2003 that the bishop asked the Vicar General to propose another priest to take over. Father Richard and I were classmates and good friends at the Seminary. So when the Vicar General asked if I wanted to take over, I said his wish was an order to me. I was then sent for training at our Mother House in France, after which I took my final commitment as the priest of the Foyer.”

What is this final commitment all about? “It means that I can no longer be transferred from the “Foyer”. I am now a full-fledged member of this community and can only work here. My duty in the Diocese is giving retreats and ensuring the wellbeing of this small community. We pray to our Lady of the Foyer for more vocations for our community.”

A cry for more vocations

The cry for an increase in vocations rises from the depths of the prayers and songs that echo several times a day from this community. The cry is so ardent that one immediately thinks of Saint Monica's plea for the conversion of her then wayward son, Augustine. One bishop's response that a child of so many tears could not possibly be lost seems an appropriate feeling when one listens to the prayers of this community. It would be surprising that our Blessed Lord, always so prompt to listen to the cry of his children, would remain deaf to the ardent plea for more vocations from this tiny community, which the occupants proudly present as "an oasis of silence" in silent Bonjongo.

Their day begins at 6 o'clock with Lauds, followed thirty minutes later by Holy Mass. Rosary comes up at mid-day; the Chaplet of the Divine Mercy at 3 p.m.; the Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament at 6 p.m.; Vespers at 7 p.m. and Compline at 9.15 p.m. Whoever comes there just to rest is advised to join the community in their prayer sessions, quite a rewarding experience, indeed. Retreat-participants have a special programme to follow.

The "Foyer de Charité" can be reached at 237-7760-52-06; 237-7771-89-48; Email contact: foyerbonjongo@yahoo.com

A prayer at the University of Buea

I am at the University of Buea (UB) on a Saturday morning for a meeting with a translator/interpreter colleague of mine. I have arrived much earlier than the meeting time and, to my surprise, UB stands unbelievably empty and quiet. It is true that I am not a regular visitor to UB but the few times I have been here, I have always been greeted by a beehive of student activities. This morning is different. It is Saturday and there is hardly anyone around. It rained last night and the air is clean, refreshing and odourless; what a sharp contrast with the foul air I breathe each morning as I drive to work through some of our neighbourhoods in Douala; or the stench-stewed air from industrial chimneys that I breathe all day long.

Since it rained last night in Buea, the well-manicured lawns at UB are attractively green; from the tree leaves water drops like tears onto the lawn. The rains have purged the air of dust and the cool wind, flowing down from the flank of the majestic Fako towering above, gently fondles my ear lobes. The trees are swaying gently in the wind as the birds land on their branches, bringing to mind the biblical mustard seed, the smallest seed of all, producing huge trees in whose branches the birds of the air build their nests.

UB, you are so quiet that I can pick up loud and clear the sound of the feet of the few people walking several yards away from me. The voices of a man and a woman a distance away come floating to my ears with unbelievable clarity. After they disappear around the corner, silence again descends like a cloak around UB and I am alone, with the quiet sound of my own footsteps on the pavement.

UB, your silence is prayerfully inviting and I can't help reaching in my pocket for my rosary. This is the Lenten season and I am in the desert of my soul, listening to my Lord as He dismisses Satan's invitation to change stones into loaves of bread, for man does not live on bread alone, but on the words that come from the mouth of my God. I am listening as my Lord refuses to take an aimless and

totally useless dive from the top of the highest mountain, at Satan's behest, just to prove that He is the Son of God, just so that God can send His angels to cushion His fall so His foot would not strike a stone. Then I listen as my Lord dismisses Satan's invitation to prostrate Himself on the ground and worship him [Satan] so he would give Him all the kingdoms of this world.

Yes, UB, your gentle, unbelievably clean surroundings invite me to examine my conscience and to see how well I too have tossed Satan's temptations away from me. The beads of my rosary gently glide between my thumb and my index finger as I saunter down your empty streets, from the Faculty of Letters to the Administration Block and back, all alone, the gentle air caressing my neck and my exposed arms.

UB, isn't it strange that all this carpet of green, covering your lawns, also covers a volcano of anger that so often erupts and turns your gentle grounds on which I now walk, into a battlefield of hatred and violence? Isn't it sad that beneath your sloping grounds lie forces of inexplicable violence, often senseless in their destructive intensity?

UB, I pray for you. I thank you for providing me with the calm surroundings to commune with God as I seek sustenance for my forty-day journey towards Easter, when my Lord conquers death – not only His but mine as well. Thank you, UB, for your empty streets, for your clean, well-manicured green grass, for the trees gently swaying back and forth in the wind; for the birds of the air that do not have to worry about what to eat, drink, or wear, for God, our Father, in His boundless generosity, gives them the finest plumage ever and all the food they need, so they never ever go hungry. Thank you, UB, for the beautiful flowers that surround you, because even King Solomon, in all the splendour of his regalia, never could match the beauty of these flowers which God, in His inexplicable magnanimity, has placed in your bosom.

UB, you are clothed in captivating beauty! You elegantly wrap your greenness around you like a garment, and your green trees bow and rise as they adore you. Then, UB, why the groans of hatred that

so often erupt from within you in such explosive violence? I don't understand it, UB.

I say this rosary for your officials; may God give them the wisdom they so badly need to take good care of all that I see around me: the buildings, the lawns, the trees and, more especially, the people who work here. I pray for your teaching staff; may they only teach the truth because it is only the truth that sets us all free. I pray for your students, our children, may they refrain from the facile temptations of the Evil One, who invites them to indulge in pursuits other than those for which they have come to you; may they shun violence of any sort and bow only to our Lord's call for peace and love of neighbour, and respect of neighbour's property. My dear UB, I make my prayer through none other than Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with the Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, One God forever and ever. Amen.

Jesus heals in silence

One of the most amazing things I find in Sacred Scripture is Christ's way of healing the sick and raising the dead to life. He does so, for the most part, in silence, away from publicity. Take, for example, the man he cleanses of the dreaded disease, leprosy. He sternly warns him, saying, "See that you say nothing to any one; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to the people" (Mk 1:44). The excited man, however, breaks his own part of the bargain by taking to the streets and telling everyone what has happened to him, thus literally forcing our Lord into hiding. Had our Lord been yearning for publicity, as many of our modern-day televangelists and unauthorised, renegade exorcist priests do, he would have stood there, thrusting out his chest and taking credit for this marvellous deed.

We see a similar failed imposition of silence when he raises Jairus' daughter from the dead. Taking with him only his most trusted lieutenants, that is, Peter and the Zebedee brothers, James and John, our Lord heads for Jairus' house. As soon as they arrive, Christ quickly expels the tumultuous crowd that is wailing uncontrollably over the death of the girl. "Go away!" he tells them. "The girl is not dead but sleeping," but the rowdy mourners ridicule him (Mt 9:24; Mk 5:40). The Master then takes only the child's father and mother and his companions into the room where the child is. Taking her by the hand, he commands her to stand up, which she does and he then asks that she be given something to eat. He follows this up with a stern warning to the child's bemused parents not to say anything to anyone about it (Mk 5:43). But, do the parents respect his injunction? That is doubtful because, as Mathew tells us, "the news of this spread throughout all the land" (Mt 9:26).

Raising the dead in Kampala

Such a happening stands in sharp contrast to some of the “miraculous” healings by our present day “prophets”. A story is told of one of them, who brought out a monstrous crowd to a stadium in Kampala, Uganda, some years ago. He had carefully put out word, through his acolytes, that he would be raising people from the dead, giving strength to weak limbs, sight to the sightless, and unstopping the ears of the deaf and dumb. In the rush to get into the stadium to be party to these marvels, a young boy of about six years of age, was crushed to death. The boy’s father and uncles placed him on a stretcher and made their way towards the dais where the prophet was bouncing up and down, punching the air with his fist, and raising the blood pressure of the crowd in thunderous demented shouts and screams. This, it was said, was to invoke the presence of the Holy Spirit.

When word reached the “prophet” that people were bringing a dead child for him to raise to life, the fellow nearly fainted with fright. He called his acolytes and told them to make sure those people didn’t get anywhere near the stand. “I pay you morons to pretend to be dead and now you’re bringing me a real corpse! Am I Christ!! Do you want these people to stone me death because, if they find out that I’m not able to raise a real corpse to life, I’m finished!!”

The guards quickly turned the poor father and his brothers away and would not let them come anywhere near the self- styled prophet. The poor people blamed the wickedness of those guards, who would not let them present their dead child to the “Man of God” who, they strongly believed, had the power to bring him back to life. While they went to bury their son, the “Man of God” was smiling all the way to the bank, his brief case stuffed with the harvest of the day from the credulous crowd that had gathered to see him perform miracles; and “miracles” they did see, but all were carefully staged-managed for the occasion.

This is unlike our Blessed Redeemer who heals in silence, away from all publicity. The beloved Apostle John tells the story of a man who had been ill for thirty eight years. Our Blessed Lord finds him

lying among the ill, the blind, the lame and the crippled at the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem (Jn 5:1-18). Christ knows that he has been ill for a long time and asks him if he wanted to be well. The sick man tells him that he has no one to put him into the pool when the water is stirred up because before he can reach the pool, someone much stronger gets there first and receives the healing power of the water. Christ then commands him to rise, take up his mat and walk (v.8).

As soon as the man stands up, picks up his mat and begins to walk, Christ disappears from sight and the man himself is not able to identify his curer to the Jewish authorities, who accuse him of violating one of the strict Jewish laws by carrying his mat on a Sabbath. It is only later that the man meets face to face with his benefactor when Christ meets him and reveals himself to him. Had Christ been one of our present day televangelists, he would have stood there to take adulation from an admiring crowd. He would, of course, not have failed to exact a fee from this poor man for curing him.

Christ shuns enemy publicity

Our Blessed Redeemer cures in silence, away from publicity. Jesuit priest Father Nicholas King, sj, who writes a Sunday meditation column for The Southern Cross, the weekly newspaper of the Bishops' Conference of South Africa, says that Christ is so much against publicity for his works that he even forbids his enemy, the devil, from singing his praises. He is referring to the several instances in the Bible when Christ expels evil spirits from victims and forbids them from speaking. "And whenever unclean spirits saw him they would fall down before him and shout, " You are the Son of God", but he would warn them sternly not to make him known" (Mk 3:11-12).

One would expect that our present day miraculous healers, who all claim to heal in Christ's holy name, would also heal in silence and away from publicity in imitation of their Divine Master. One would have also thought that since they received without charge, they too would give without charge (Mt 10:8). That is not what we see. Many,

if not all of them, are busy milking the credulous crowd, using the proceeds to fuel the private jets they fly around the world in.

Yet, do we really need to leave our Church to receive cures for our spiritual illnesses from self-styled prophets and unauthorised exorcist priests? I doubt that we do. All we need to do is take our petitions to Jesus Christ, our Resurrected Lord, who was, who is and who will always be, and who continues to effect miracles in our lives through his Church, the one he built on Peter, the rock, whose visible successor still lives in Rome.

I Walked Beside a Saint

Reports say millions of people around the world, who could not make it to the eternal city of Rome, watched on television as the Holy Father, Pope Francis, raised two of his predecessors, John XXIII and John Paul II, to the honours of the altar, on April 24, 2014. I was one of them. As I watched and listened to all that was said about the two popes, I recalled that over nineteen years ago, I walked alongside one of them, Saint John Paul II, in Yaoundé, Cameroon's capital city. The year was 1995. I was then a young reporter for *L'Effort camerounais*, the oldest newspaper in Cameroon, the voice of the Catholic Church. Here is what I wrote for our paper on that occasion.

Part One: Cameroon welcomes Pope John Paul II.

On Thursday afternoon, September 14, 1995, one had the feeling that the people of Yaoundé were all moving, literally, towards one direction – the Nsimalen International Airport. Hours before the Holy Father's arrival, the streets through which he was to pass were already overflowing with people, many waving miniature flags of the Holy See and of Cameroon.

At the airport itself, no-nonsense security people, many of them in smoke-stained goggles, dressed in dark or black suits, frisked you thoroughly for hidden weapons. Occasionally, one of them would lift the lapel of his coat and scream an order into it, or answer one from it. In their hands, walkie-talkies of various shapes and sizes blared out incessant instructions to the bearers.

The Mbalmayo choir

When we succeeded to get into the airport, we saw the “Notre Dame du Rosaire” Choir from the Mbalmayo Cathedral rivalling the military band at the far end of the runway. The Nsimalen International Airport falls within the jurisdiction of the Diocese of Mbalmayo. The choir nearly went into a frenzy of excitement when

the frail-looking, retired bishop of Mbalmayo, Monsignor Paul Etoga, the first African bishop of Francophone Africa, was led by hand to greet the excited choristers.

Hundreds of bishops, for the most part dressed in white cassocks and with crosses glistening on their chests, were already lining up alongside the red carpet the Holy Father and President Paul Biya would walk on. On the opposite side of the carpet, neatly suited ministers and diplomats were also lining up, shaking hands with new arrivals and exchanging greetings and other pleasantries.

Here comes the Pope

At 2:25 p.m., a helicopter landed and out came President Paul Biya and his wife, Chantal. They then disappeared into the waiting lounge. At 2:45 p.m., against a blue, sunny sky, an ALITALIA 747 plane, came into view, escorted by a lone jet fighter of the Cameroonian air-force. It landed at one end of the airport and taxied down the runway to a spot where the red carpet ended.

In the meantime, President Biya and his spouse were escorted from the presidential lounge to the spot where the plane would stop. Photographers, cameramen and women, and other paparazzis started running back and forth, trying to get a good position from where to shoot the best pictures they could get.

At exactly 3 p.m. Yaoundé time, the scheduled arrival time, the Holy Father's plane came to a halt, prompting one foreign journalist near me to say, with a smile on his lips, that the Pope had arrived with "religious precision". Shortly thereafter, the door of the plane flew open and a few minutes later the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, was escorted down from the plane, where he put his foot down on Cameroonian soil for the second time in ten years. Gun salutes flew into the air, sending birds in the nearby forest fleeing for dear life.

Blessing the soil

The first time the Holy Father was here in 1985, the first thing he did was to go down on his knees and kiss the ground. This time around, ten years later, with the weight of age bearing down so

heavily on his shoulders, he merely blessed some of the soil that was brought to him on a plate.

Then began the traditional series of handshakes and brief conversations, first of all with the President of the Republic, Mr. Paul Biya and his spouse, Chantal, and then with the people lining the red carpet; the conversation being shorter or a little longer depending on who it was he was greeting. He lingered a little longer – understandably so -- with the members of the Cameroonian episcopacy and diplomats from certain countries.

Who killed Monsignor Plumey?

The highlight of the airport ceremony was no doubt President Biya's welcome speech and the Supreme Pontiff's response. President Biya expressed delight with the opportunity to welcome the Pope to Cameroon for the second time in ten years. He then lauded his government's achievements in the area of democracy and respect for human rights. He said Cameroon felt truly honoured to have been chosen as the site for the promulgation of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, before wishing the Holy Father a peaceful stay in our country.

In response, the Pope expressed his delight on seeing the Cameroonian land again. He then thanked the Cameroonian people in French for their welcome before sending a special word of greeting in English to the Anglophone community of this country. Turning to the Catholic clergy, he said he shared their anguish over the feeling of insecurity, engendered by senseless violence that has been unleashed on them for reasons no one seems able, or willing, to explain. He cited the case of Monsignor Yves Plumey, the Emeritus Archbishop of Garoua, assassinated under circumstances that have so far remained a mystery.

Many observers were surprised that the head of the Catholic Church would so directly confront the head of the Cameroonian nation over the question of insecurity which not only threatens the clergy but the ordinary people as well. Speculation was rife among journalists, particularly of the local media, as to what the Biya

administration's reaction would likely be. Whatever the case, it did seem to many of us that the slight chill that seemed to descend on the diplomatic and especially government circles at the airport that afternoon was not only caused by the rain that was then falling in Nsimalen. The Supreme Pontiff's direct reference to the assassination of Catholic clergy and ordinary Cameroonians did certainly lead many to a moment of silent reflection and an examination of conscience.

In the meantime, thousands of ordinary people had lined the road from Nsimalen to the city of Yaoundé to give the Pastor of the Universal Church a befitting welcome to Cameroon.

Part Two: He came, he saw, and he conquered

There is a beautiful passage in the Apocalypse in which Saint John describes a huge crowd, impossible to count, of people from every nation, race, tribe, and language, prostrating themselves before the Lamb and the Throne, enveloping their praises to the Almighty in songs and prayers (Rev 7:9). Whenever I see the crowd Pope John Paul II pulls wherever he goes, I always recall that biblical passage. It came to mind again on Friday, 15 September 1995, at the Yaoundé Air force Base, where thousands of people had gathered to hear the Holy Father say Mass. That crowd would surely have been much larger had the population not been discouraged by the strict security precautions, coupled with the persistent rumour – denied by Church leaders – that only those with invitation cards would be allowed to attend the Mass. Many therefore stayed back home, glued to their television screens or their transistor radios. That notwithstanding, the crowd that showed up was still impressive.

Weeping at the beauty of the Church's music

There were, indeed, men and women and children of every shade and colour, tribe, race and language, most of them dressed in a riot of colours – a magnificent “rainbow” of humanity – that had come out to join the Holy Father around the altar of the Lord, sending praises to the Almighty in songs and prayers. And what a splendid blend of song, rhythm and prayer! As I watched the magnificent performance

of the multi-ethnic choir, conducted with such elegance and grace by a well-known musicologist, Reverend Father Etienne Bétené, I thought I could hear, in my mind's ear, the voice of Saint Augustine, the African Saint, drifting across fifteen hundred years of history, reaffirming the majesty of songs in praise of the Lord. In fact, when moved by the splendour of church songs, Saint Augustine wrote: "I wept at the beauty of your hymns, and I was profoundly moved at the sweet sound of your Church's singing. Those sounds flowed into my ears, and the truth streamed into my heart. My feeling of devotion overflowed, and the tears ran from my eyes, and I was happy in them" (Confessions, 9, 6).

Long before the start of the Holy Father's Pontifical High Mass, that choir was already softening the hearts, souls and minds of the faithful, and non-faithful alike, preparing them to join the Vicar of Christ around the Lord's altar.

At 8:30 a.m., hundreds of bishops from the 25 countries present, which ranged from North Africa through West Africa to the great lakes of the Central African region, began to move to the altar in a slow and dignified procession, escorted and serenaded by a group of women choristers, dancing to the rhythm of drums and xylophones. That procession was led by Bishops Jean-Bosco Ntep and Dieudonné Watio, of the Dioceses of Edea and Nkongsamba, respectively, then the "benjamin" of the Cameroonian Episcopate.

Shortly thereafter, the Holy Father arrived, standing in a convertible car and waving to the cheering crowd. The xylophones and drums and the siren voices of the women in the choir acknowledged the Supreme Pontiff's arrival by going into a frenzy of excitement that held the already taut air in its grip for well over ten minutes.

The presidential family

It was when the Holy Father was in the sacristy vesting himself for Holy Mass that the Head of State, Mr. Paul Biya, arrived, accompanied by his wife, Chantal, and Chantal's step-son, Frank Biya, a tall, lanky, bespectacled young man, suave and gracefully dressed in

an expensive-looking, light blue suit, with Parisian opulence written all over it. He carried himself with obvious elegance and with the sure certainty that he was the centre of all attention and comment from the rest of us – which he was!

The arrival of the President's family sent dark-goggled, stern-faced security people nervously skipping around as if they were standing barefoot on pins. In their huge hands, walkie-talkies and hand-held phones of various shapes and sizes bullied frantic instructions to the bearers who, in turn, screamed back into them or into the lapels of their jackets.

As I watched the scene, I could not help noting the remarkable difference between the arrival of the Holy Father and that of the President of the Republic. When the Holy Father arrived, all was peaceful, with no unnecessary agitation or nervousness on the side of the security men and women around me. In fact, one of them, who stood a few feet away from me probably broke protocol by joining us in clapping and smiling broadly. When the Holy Father within view, I felt an irrepressible urge to run towards him, to touch him, and feel his comforting hand on my forehead. With the President of the Republic, however, dread overcame me and I felt like fleeing in the opposite direction, for dear life.

At exactly 9:30 a.m., after the President and his family had taken their seats, and their nervous security operatives had calmed down and become 'human' again, the cardinals, archbishops and bishops, who were to concelebrate the Holy Mass with the Pope, began to make their way to the altar, serenaded by the music from the choir.

For his part, the Holy Father took a shorter route from the sacristy to the altar. In fact, many people, who were scanning the approaching procession of bishops, hoping to catch a glimpse of the Holy Father, were surprised and slightly disappointed that he was already at the altar.

Bilingual presentation

The highlights of that Mass were, undoubtedly, the speech by Monsignor Jean Zoa, whose Archdiocese of Yaoundé was the host of

the occasion, and the Holy Father's homily. Moving with relative ease from French to English, he recalled in some detail what he termed, "the profound trauma and the mutilations" the black race has suffered from slavery through colonialism and now neo-colonialism, and reminded the world that such acts did not only dishonour the African "but the whole human race."

He then mentioned that it was now time for reconciliation with our past as a way of finding "grounds for a realistic and creative optimism" without which we cannot "create a universal, Trinitarian and communitarian culture based on a mutual exchange of gifts." That is why, he continued, enculturation "must be firmly rooted in a deep experience of conversion."

He then called on the African laity to "take the destiny of Africa into their hands as baptised Christians committed to spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as leaders and servants of their communities, as builders of history and stewards of the earthly city."

Early African theologians

For his part, the Holy Father recalled the history of evangelisation in Africa, dating from the dawn of Christianity when Christ had given the injunction to his disciples to go out to all the nations of the world, making converts and baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Mt 29:19). He highlighted for praise the evangelisation role played by African theologians of the early era of Christianity, notably Saint Augustine, a man his predecessor, Pope Paul VI called "One of the most brilliant lights of the Christian world."

The Synod of the entire continent

He then gave a brief history of the recent Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Africa that met in Rome in April and May 1994, and whose fruits he had come to promulgate in Yaoundé. He defined a synod as the meeting of roads along which the Church moves in various countries and continents of the world. He said that even though the synod tradition was not new in Africa, it was the first time

ever that a synod had been entirely dedicated to the continent, from the Cape of Good Hope to Cairo, and from the Red Sea to the slave fort of Gorée, off the coast of Senegal.

To reflect the multi-national nature of the Yaoundé meeting, the Supreme Pontiff sent greetings in Portuguese to the Lusophone communities of Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau, and Sao Tome and Principe islands. In Spanish, he spoke to the Hispanophone community of Equatorial Guinea, and in English, he saluted the Anglophone communities of West Africa and used the Queen's language to comment on the day's Gospel from Saint Luke in which Jesus applies the words of prophet Isaiah to himself in the synagogue, thus identifying himself as the long-awaited Messiah, bearer of the Good News of salvation to the poorest of the poor (Lk 4: 14-21).

The Holy Father continued that the Good News would have to be infused into the very veins of African cultures and traditions through the process of enculturation. If culture was the art of cultivating the vineyard of the great African continent, enculturation must be all that confirms the presence of Christ in African cultures, that is, in African languages, literatures, songs and dance, and in the way of celebrating the Eucharist without losing its universal flair. With those words, the Holy Father placed the stamp of his pastoral approval on ceremonies such as the Lectionary procession that the Nso choir led and the Offertory procession, inspired from a Zairean ritual, both of them having played a prominent part during that Holy Mass.

Spread the Synod message

It was also during that Pontifical High Mass that the Holy Father gave copies of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, that he was to promulgate that afternoon at the Our Lady of Victories Cathedral, to a number of people, including cardinals, archbishops, bishops, priests, religious and Christ's lay faithful. He then urged them to make its content known to everyone in their farms, on the street, at their jobsites, in their families, from one generation to another.

History will have it on record for eternity that it was in our country, Cameroon, in the year of our Lord 1995, on the 15th day of the month of September, that the Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church, the Servant of the servants of God, John Paul II, on his 75th year on earth, and on the 17th year of his pontificate, promulgated the Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*. May God bless our land and our people! Amen.

Part Three: Africa, stand up and walk tall and proud!

The culminating point of the Holy Father's visit to Cameroon was definitely the promulgation session of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, at the Our Lady of Victories Cathedral in downtown Yaoundé on Friday, 15 September 1995.

The Head of State, Mr. Paul Biya and his family arrived at 4:25 p.m. Exactly five minutes later, the Supreme Pontiff, Pope John Paul II, made his way into the packed-full cathedral to a truly euphoric reception. Banners were unfurled in the crowd and one of them announced in bold letters the love the pygmies of Mouloundou have for the Holy Father. Dispersed in the crowd were individuals waving the red and white flag of Poland, reminding the Holy Father that the people of his homeland are also among those who are spreading the Good News of our Lord's salvation in our country.

Security men had quite a hard time fraying a passage for the Pope to the altar. This was all the more challenging as the Holy Father would not walk past any child that was presented to him. In fact, one woman literally threw her baby into the Holy Father's arms from behind some security men blocking her way. As usual, the Pope paused long enough to embrace and bless the baby, a gesture that sent his mother dancing with joy.

After the recitation of the Synod prayer, Christian Cardinal Tumi, Cameroon's only Cardinal, then took the floor and, among other things, stressed that it was vital for African cultures to receive the Gospel message and be purified by it. That is what enculturation is all about, he said. Then came the turn of Monsignor Basile Mve Engone,

Bishop of the Diocese of Oyem in Gabon, Chairman of the Episcopal Conferences of the Central African Region (ACERAC). Among other things, he regretted the negative image Africa and her people have suffered from over the centuries, particularly in the Western media, but concluded that the “Synod of Resurrection and of Hope” had come to deliver Africa and her people from their fears and tribulations.

The Archbishop of Abuja (Nigeria), His Grace John Onaiyekan, summarised the document of the Post-Synodal Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, and outlined what he saw as the challenges ahead, especially in the areas of enculturation, dialogue, peace and social justice, the proclamation of the Good News and the use of the means of social communication to spread the Gospel.

Non Catholics welcome the synod

Then came the turn of non-Catholics. Pastor McClean Kumi, a minister of the Methodist Church of Ghana, spoke for the Protestant churches of Africa. He saw the Catholic Church’s invitation to non-Catholic congregations to such important events as the Vatican II Council and now the present Synod as a salutary quest for Christian unity. He said other Christian denominations in Africa would no doubt also benefit from the fruits of this Synod.

Speaking on behalf of the Muslim community in Cameroon, Sheikh Mounir Pekassa Sin Ibrahim, saw the association of Muslims with the Holy Father’s visit as a welcome sign of fruitful and peaceful cooperation between the monotheistic religions of Africa. He highlighted for praise the Holy Father’s role in facilitating the construction of a mosque at the Vatican. He then loudly condemned religious fanaticism and sects, and hoped that the Holy Father would ensure that the inter-religious forum held in Cameroon each year would continue.

Voice of the ‘voiceless’

When it had earlier been announced that a representative of traditional religions would also intervene, many were expecting to see

a traditional ‘priest’ or ‘jujuman’, bare-chested and grass-skirted, with zebra-like chalk-marks on his chest, waving a horse-tail fly-whisk in the air, chasing invisible flies and conferring with invisible spirits. That was not to be, however, because a university don, Professor Pierre Titi Nwell, a convinced Catholic intellectual himself, stood in a three-piece suit to speak for what he called the ‘voiceless’ adepts of African traditional religions, which he lauded for their hospitable and accommodating nature. He said that since the ancestral cult is such an integral part of African life, Christians themselves tend to believe in it. As such, the Church must strive to understand and cooperate with traditional religious beliefs which infiltrate every aspect of an African’s life.

Accept Christ in your cultures

Concluding the evening, the Holy Father, who had all along been silently telling the beads of his rosary, no doubt praying for the success of the event, took the floor and stressed the importance of religious tolerance. Defining enculturation as the intimate encounter of people’s cultures with Christ, he appealed to African theologians to help their people to understand and appreciate the Gospel message more fully. He then urged the African man and woman to stand up and walk tall and proud into the third millennium of the Christian era.

A scene similar to the delirious moment that had greeted the Holy Father’s entry into the Cathedral, repeated itself as people rushed to touch him before he left, giving the security men and women quite a run for their money.

The Catholic Church and the radio

At the Second Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Africa, that held in Rome from the 4th to the 25th of October 2009, the Synodal Fathers noted, with great delight, that there is “a veritable explosion of Catholic radio stations in Africa, from only about 15 in 1994 to over 163 today in 32 nations.” They then strongly urged the Catholic Church in “those nations, which still have reservations in this regard, to review their policies, for the good of their nations and people.”

It is indeed comforting to know that Cameroon is among the countries the Synodal Fathers are highlighting for praise. In fact, Catholic radio stations are beginning to sprout, albeit slowly, throughout our country. In the Ecclesiastical Province of Bamenda, for example, the Diocese of Buea has already launched its own separate diocesan radio called “Divine Mercy Radio”, while the entire Ecclesiastical Province is eagerly waiting to hear “Radio Evangelium” hit the airwaves of its territory. This is an encouraging sign indeed and one can only join the Synodal Fathers to salute the efforts of our bishops to equip our Church with this great modern instrument of evangelisation that is the radio.

Up until now, Catholic radio stations have been few and far between, the best known being Radio Reine in Yaoundé and Radio Veritas, the radio of the Catholic Archdiocese of Douala. Whereas Radio Reine is said to be the private property of a Catholic priest of the Archdiocese of Yaoundé, Radio Veritas, for its part, is the creation of the previous occupant of the Metropolitan See of Douala, His Eminence Christian Cardinal Tumi, today the Archbishop Emeritus.

Rome endorses radio

That it is only now that the Catholic Church in Africa, as a whole, and in Cameroon, in particular, is beginning to fully embrace the

means of social communication, notably the radio, as a vibrant tool for evangelisation is somewhat surprising, given that the Fathers of the Church have always encouraged local Churches to make extensive use of all available means of social communication to spread Christ's Word. The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, for example, issued a decree entitled "Inter Mirifica", which the Servant of God, Pope Paul VI, promulgated in 1963, urging the Church to make extensive use of the available means of mass communication to spread the Gospel to an increasingly secular world.

Pope Paul VI so valued the means of social communication that he openly declared that the Church "would be guilty before the Lord if she did not utilise these powerful means" to proclaim God's Word (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, No 35). This message was later expressed, with even greater urgency, by his successor, Saint John Paul II, a media man, par excellence, for whom the world of communication was "the first Areopagus of modern times", the 'Areopagus' being the square in central Athens where Saint Paul, the Apostle of the Gentiles, is said to have preached the Good News of Christ's salvation to the Athenians, during one of his missionary journeys, in a language the ordinary person could understand. Saint John Paul II praised the means of social communications for their ability to unify humanity and transform it into a global village' (*Encyclical Redemptoris Missio*, N^o. 37).

Saint John Paul II, who never missed an occasion to exhort Catholic media practitioners to make maximum use of these means of social communication, always used his yearly messages on World Communication Day (May 4) to encourage the Church not to be afraid of new technologies. "Catholics should not be afraid to throw open the doors of social communication to Christ, so that the Good News may be heard from the housetops of the world," (35th World Communication Day, May 27, 2001). He also urged Catholic media practitioners to cast their net deep into the Internet, which he considered a world of its own in dire need of evangelisation.

His successor, Benedict XVI, whom few had thought would take the means of social communication as seriously as his predecessor,

even went further by reaching out, especially to the youth in the medium they cherish and use so extensively, that is, the Internet (Facebook, Twitter, etc.). Like his predecessor, Benedict XVI has used his messages on World communication Day to exhort the Church to make maximum use of the means of social communication to spread Christ's message to humanity.

On February 17, 2009, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, Director of the Vatican Press Office, told the annual meeting of the Communications Commission of the Spanish Bishops' Conference, that "today there is a great number of people who are not reached directly by the message of the Church, but who can be reached through the media, so that it is our precise duty to try to use this way, even more so these ways – because they are many and varied – for the proclamation of the Gospel."

It is therefore admirable that the Bishops of the Ecclesiastical Province of Bamenda have heeded the call of the Synodal Fathers and have decided to create Divine Mercy Radio in Buea and Radio Evangelium in the rest of the province, to spread the Gospel. Before them, the Archbishop Emeritus of Douala, His Eminence Christian Tumi, had taken the bold step to endow his Archdiocese with a radio station. I happened to be one of those who played the 'midwife' during the 'delivery' of Radio Veritas, and it was a difficult delivery, to put it mildly

Radio Veritas, a difficult delivery

His Eminence Cardinal Tumi has extensively discussed the challenges encountered in the creation of Radio Veritas in his readable book, *The Political Regimes of Ahmadou Ahidjo and Paul Biya, and Christian Tumi, Priest*. What I am writing here involves just a few facts I gathered as a privileged observer and collaborator of the Archbishop at that particular moment in the history of our Archdiocese. The authoritative voice on this issue remains, of course, that of His Eminence Cardinal Tumi.

Back in the late 90s or early 2000, Cardinal Tumi convened a diocesan synod to discuss John Paul II's Post Synodal Apostolic

Exhortation, Ecclesia in Africa, the document he signed in Yaoundé in 1995. As an aside, history has recorded this document as the only one of its kind ever to have been signed by a reigning Supreme Pontiff outside the Vatican.

The purpose of the said diocesan synod was to enable the clergy and selected members of Christ's faithful to reflect on the papal document and recommend ways and means of implementing it within the context of our local Church. I was part of the commission on social communication.

At the end of the discussions, the commission on the means of social communication strongly recommended that our Archbishop equip our Archdiocese with a radio station, for a start, and a television station later. To many of us, however, our recommendation was mere wishful thinking. We completely shelved the proposal when Cardinal Tumi, in his usual jovial manner, later asked us where we thought he was going to get money from for a radio and television station. "Gone are the days when Rome gave us money for things like these, which are considered more a luxury than a necessity." To us, that was the end of the story.

Cardinal Tumi approves radio creation

Great then was our surprise when a few months later, Cardinal Tumi returned from a visit to Rome to inform us that he had succeeded to get a transmitter for a radio station. As news went round that our Archdiocese would soon have a radio station, excitement gripped everyone, especially us, journalists and technicians.

It was not long thereafter that we all began to realise that there was much more to creating and running a radio station than met the eye. It was the first time this type of technical work was being undertaken in our Archdiocese, and quite a few, sometimes very costly, mistakes were made. For example, technicians of all shades and colour popped up from nowhere, each claiming they could deliver this or that product at the most competitive rate; but once money changed hands, some of them simply melted into the

surrounding bushes and were never heard of again. Some proposed or supplied spare parts that were already visibly used, but claimed they were new. When you questioned the ‘newness’ of their products, some would even ask you to bring the Bible for them to swear their honesty on it, before God and man.

Such challenges notwithstanding, the physical structures of the radio station gradually became visible to the naked eye – the studios were put in place, an antenna pushed its way into the sky, the transmitter began to hum in one of the rooms as the current tickled its ribs, etc. Away from the public eye, the administrative work was also progressing. An application file was prepared, requesting authorisation from the Ministry of Communications to start broadcasting. To ensure that the application documents did not develop legs and disappear in the wrong quarters, Cardinal Tumi personally and wisely entrusted them to the care of a priest working in Yaoundé. The documents being in the hands of a priest, we thought we could breathe easier, thinking that they were in safe hands. How wrong we were!

The Tumi/Ndongo standoff

Months of waiting for a head nod from Yaoundé soon turned to a year and the second year was approaching without any reaction from the powers-that-be. Finally, the technicians convinced the Archbishop that the dust and rust could damage the transmitter and other sensitive equipment, if these were left unused for too long. They asked him to authorise them to test-run the equipment, just to make sure that they did not break down for want of use.

The Cardinal gave a nod to their technical recommendations. I remember the excitement in the studios one morning when, for the first time ever, the first musical notes from Radio Veritas oozed out into the airwaves of the city of Douala. This was accompanied shortly thereafter by the voice of Father Gabriel Samba, OP, the Managing Director of Radio Veritas, as it welcomed listeners and informed the world that the voice of the Catholic Church was being heard for the first time on Radio Veritas on an experimental basis on FM 101.5.

We had a small transistor radio through which we monitored the sound quality going out to our listeners. We all jumped up in joy as the first soothing sounds of Christian music poured out into the city of Douala, announcing the arrival of a different type of radio, one that would enable its listeners to hear God's Word, not in the cacophony of riotous noise the other radio stations were pumping into the city airwaves, but rather in a soft breeze of soothing sound and angelic voices. We were telling the inhabitants of Douala, and beyond, that God's voice is heard more in a gentle breeze than in a storm or earthquake (1 Kg 19:12).

Unfortunately, Radio Veritas did not experiment its broadcast for long before the then Communications Minister, Professor Jacques Fame Ndong, imposed an interdict on it, calling it a clandestine radio station. Cardinal Tumi was summoned to the Littoral Governor's office and given the Honourable Minister's order. We waited with bated breath to know what the Cardinal's reaction would be. In hushed tones, we all prayed for him to defy the Minister's orders so we could keep broadcasting. But, as soon as he received the written order from the Minister, Cardinal Tumi ordered that we immediately cease broadcasting.

Sadness settled in the newsroom as our technicians reluctantly switched off the sound. We felt quite frustrated and angry that Cardinal Tumi had given in so quickly to the Minister's order. In fact, the national press was already vibrating with the news and everyone expected a confrontation between the Archbishop and the Minister, the two men having already clashed in the past in a confrontation the echoes of which were heard around the world. Newspaper speculations ran amok and newspaper sales quadrupled as newsrooms bustled with excitement over what was being already dubbed as the second Tumi/Ndong battle that was bound to send sparks flying.

Silent diplomacy wins the day

Internally, some of us were ready to revolt against the Archbishop's decision and were only held back by the man's

imposing presence and his intimidating height, and the fear of being excommunicated from the Church for defying our Bishop's orders. As the dust of the confrontation gradually settled, we began to hear that the Minister was not as wrong as we had at first thought. In fact, it would seem the priest to whom the Cardinal had entrusted the application papers had, somehow "forgotten" to hand them over to the powers-that-be. Why he "forgot" to forward such an important document from his bishop to the ministry has never been made public to some of us.

As we fumed over the banning of our radio station, we did not know that Cardinal Tumi had settled for a much quieter diplomacy approach. He had decided to write directly to the Head of State, President Paul Biya himself, who gave a favourable head nod to the Cardinal's request. The authorisation to reopen Radio Veritas took us completely by surprise.

The first major event covered by Radio Veritas was the Cardinal's Christmas mid-night Mass 2005. The congregation only became aware of the presence of Radio Veritas at the end of the Mass when the Cardinal pointed to us at one corner of the Saints Peter and Paul Cathedral and informed the congregation that their Mass had gone out live on Radio Veritas to the city of Douala for the first time. The applause from the congregation was truly deafening. Cardinal Tumi then briefly recounted the tribulations of Radio Veritas, which were no longer news to the excited congregation and, before God's people assembled in his Cathedral, he sent a special word of thanks to the Head of State for authorising him to run a diocesan radio, a radio solely for evangelisation.

The radio is a financial guzzler

Radio Veritas came onstream in 2005 during my tour of duty as the General Manager of the diocesan printing press, better known by its French acronym MACACOS (Maison Catholique de la Communication Sociale). It soon became evident to us that running a diocesan radio was no small business, financially-speaking, that is. Our authorisation as a radio of evangelisation did not permit us to

make any money through advertisement. Unlike the other commercially-oriented radio stations in the city, Radio Veritas had to be entirely funded by the Archdiocese of Douala, with very little coming in from the few announcements of a mainly Christian nature we were allowed to make.

Everything had to be bought or paid for: there were the personnel (journalists and technicians) to recruit and pay, and delicate and high-tech equipment to buy to keep the radio on the air. The Archbishop, realising what a huge financial drain the radio was becoming to the diocesan budget, quickly dropped it, like a hot potato, into my hands in my capacity as the General Manager of MACACOS, the financial venture of the Archdiocese.

It soon became clear to us that it was not easy even for a money-making venture, like MACACOS, to easily absorb the expenses incurred by the diocesan radio. The legal impediments had to be cleared before it could come fully under the wings of MACACOS. Lawyers, seeing a juicy ‘soya’ dangling at the end of the stick, began to parade in and out of my office, each bringing in his/her brief-case elaborate and mind-boggling plans. No sooner had we received the proposed plans, than their authors were already dropping a bill on my lap, sometimes running into seven digits, for their services.

Before MACACOS could officially and legally absorb Radio Veritas as an integral part of its operations, lawyers and other legal ‘experts’ had made off with quite a chunk of bread from us. I recall how shocked the MACACOS board members were when they saw the dramatic drop in our earnings at the end of the year. Some smelling a financial rat, kept me on my toes for hours with questions concerning the downward curve of the financial earnings that year relative to the previous. Even when it became evident that the radio was the culprit, I still had suspicious eyes being turned in my direction. Mercifully, the figures vindicated my team and me.

As I mentioned earlier, running a diocesan radio is a capital-intensive business. A Christian radio only consumes, and brings in very little in way of financial resources. We are allowed to use 10 percent of our air time to make short announcements. This is not

enough to earn the radio financial resources to keep it on the air. In fact, we usually receive announcements of a mainly religious nature from our parishes. Even though we charge a meagre five hundred francs CFA per announcement, some priests still find that we are too expensive! They want their announcements read on the air for free. Imagine that!

Training is capital

Not long after the radio went onstream, we found ourselves confronting another difficulty. We became aware that the radio was not only the high-tech equipment that cost us quite a fortune. Our personnel too proved costly, not only in terms of salary, which was not on the low side -- far from it -- but also in terms of training. It became evident that if we wanted good Catholic journalists, we had to train them ourselves. The schools of journalism sent us young men and women to whom they had given the basic notions of journalism. The onus to make Catholic journalists of them fell squarely on our shoulders. The first time we listened to them cover the Holy Mass, for example, we nearly collapsed. Their vocabulary and expressions had nothing Catholic in them at all. The Cardinal was scandalised to hear one of them calling the Cathedral, 'a crowded hall' with people waiting for the Mass to begin! Another one called the Cardinal's mitre 'a hat'; and his crozier, a 'walking' stick!

With the Archbishop's approval, we began to organise a series of training workshops for them, in English and French. We invited priests to groom them on the use of Catholic terminology, particularly relating to the Mass. Monsignor Paul Nyaga, the then Vicar General, enlightened them on how to address Church officials (the Pope, Cardinals, Archbishops, Bishops, Priests), in speech and in writing. We held one training workshop in collaboration with the Buea-based, monthly Catholic publication, Cameroon Panorama, with the then Editor-in-Chief, Father Moses Tazoh, sharing his experiences with the young journalists. It was costly, in financial terms, but remarkably effective in terms of improved delivery on the air.

Collaboration with other Catholic radio stations

Radio Evangelium, Divine Mercy Radio and other Catholic radio stations should start giving serious thought to collaborating among themselves as well as with other Catholic radio stations, either in terms of programme exchanges or in the formation of their staff (journalists and technicians alike).

A few years ago, Father Gabriel Samba, OP, the Managing Director of Radio Veritas, and I proposed to some officials of a Catholic radio station in Yaoundé to collaborate with Radio Veritas in certain fields. We suggested that they could relay some programmes from Radio Veritas and vice versa. We cited the case of one of our popular morning programs, the “Press Review.” We told them that since MACACOS prints a good number of newspapers, Radio Veritas has access to them before anyone else and is thus best placed to make a good review of them. We suggested they could simply relay Radio Veritas in the morning. Unfortunately, no one seemed interested.

Collaboration, not competition, must be what all Catholic radio stations should strive for in this highly competitive environment. I am comforted in this regard by Father Federico Lombardi, SJ, cited earlier, when he says that “... one must seek, in the respective countries, the most effective ways of collaboration in the field of social communications, to guarantee at the same time the vitality of the local communication and the wider dimension, which gives the sense of the universality and union of the universal church.” As a concrete example, he mentions the case of France where diocesan radios are united in a network at the national level, called RCF (Radios Chrésiennes de France).

In addition to retransmitting programmes from Vatican Radio and radio stations from this French network, as Radio Veritas does, our diocesan radio stations could perhaps borrow programmes from other African Catholic radio stations. How about going to next door Nigeria and entering into partnership agreements with Catholic radio stations in that country and exchanging programmes with them? Just a thought.

Collaboration with other Christian radio stations

Collaboration must be fostered among Catholic radio stations operating through our country, irrespective of linguistic leaning. Such collaboration should, however, not remain among Catholic radio stations only; it should reach out, in Christian solidarity, to radio stations of other Christian denominations that are not in communion with the Church of Rome.

In 1989, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications published a pamphlet entitled “Criteria for Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Cooperation in Communications” (Vatican City, 1989). In it, the authors urge collaboration with the other denominations in the field of mass communications as a way of ensuring “a united religious presence in the very heart of mass communications.”

They then call for “reciprocal participation of Catholic communicators in the communications initiatives of other Churches and Christian communities, and of other Christians in Catholic projects.” They, however, caution that such joint initiatives should only be for the purpose of allowing “Christians to give a common witness to Christ.” Care should, however, be taken not “to weaken the authenticity of the Christian and ecclesial message, or to limit any specifically Catholic initiative” (p.6). They urge Catholic communicators to “provide fair and objective information on other religions of humanity” (p. 10).

This reminds me of a workshop on social communication that some Christian churches organised a few years ago at the Paul VI Memorial Pastoral Centre in Mendankwe, Bamenda. I happened by chance to be spending a week of rest there too. Unfortunately, there was no Catholic presence at that three-day workshop. I asked the organising secretary, a Baptist missionary, why they had not invited anyone from the Catholic Church and he assured me that an invitation had indeed been sent to the communication service of the Archdiocese of Bamenda, and that they too were sad that no one had answered present. When I later contacted the priest in charge of the means of social communications at the Bamenda Archdiocese, he dismissively waved it away, saying he doubted they had missed

anything at all by not being there. But, from what I could gather, as an outsider, much that was useful was discussed at that workshop, including ecumenical collaboration among the participating churches. I thought an opportunity to make the Catholic voice heard in that forum had been missed, unfortunately.

Conclusion

Let me say, in conclusion, that I am delighted to applaud with the Synodal Fathers this “veritable explosion” of Catholic radio stations in Africa following the recommendations of the First Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Africa in 1994. I am happy that the Ecclesiastical Province of Bamenda is at the forefront of the creation of Catholic radio stations in Cameroon. Without being asked, I have taken upon myself the audacity to share my personal experiences as a privileged witness to the creation of Radio Veritas in Douala, a radio station of evangelisation that has become a source of reference for many people, not only Catholics, but others as well, in the city of Douala, and far beyond. Hopefully, the Bishops of the Ecclesiastical Province of Bamenda, and those they have appointed to head the new radio stations in their Province, will agree with me that isolationism is not the way forward for any radio station of evangelisation worth the salt. Collaboration with other Catholic radio stations, and with radio stations of other Christian denominations, within Cameroon and beyond, is the only way forward in our evangelisation drive. All for the Greater Glory of God Almighty. Amen.

Train seminarians to be good managers of human and financial resources

The Saint Thomas Aquinas Major Seminary (STAMS), the major formation house of the Ecclesiastical Province of Bamenda in Cameroon, recently celebrated its 40th year of existence under the theme: “Called to be Saints and Scholars.” Forty years is indeed a lifetime worth celebrating. We give thanks to God for the existence of this formation house, a nursery for future priests, as one musically-gifted priest, formed in that institution, once sang to honour one of its founding bishops, Archbishop Emeritus Paul Verdzekov, who is today looking down on his good work from heaven.

As a lay faithful of Christ, who loves his Church and prays for the wellbeing of his priests, I will like to contribute to the thoughts sparked by the celebration of this momentous occasion in the life of our local Church. The last time I said something concerning our priests, and the need for them to take care of their health, it unfortunately caused quite a stir of indignation among clergy and laity alike, to the extent that I was banned from the Catholic publication that carried my views.

Today, far from wishing to stir another hornet’s nest of controversy, I just want to briefly comment on a recent interview the Rector of that major seminary, Reverend Father Ignatius Waindim, granted to journalist Paul Ngam of Radio Cameroon. I hope my views will be understood as just the concern of a simple lay faithful of Christ, who loves his Church, and only wishes to see her prosper more, all for the greater glory of God Almighty.

In answer to a question on the necessity to train future priests to be good managers of the human and financial resources they will administer after ordination, the Rector seemed to downplay – and I hope I did not hear him well – the significance of such a programme, wondering if it would not add an unnecessary financial burden to the already overstretched, shoe-string budget he is already managing. The

conclusion seemingly being that after ordination priests would always acquire such human and financial management skills on the ground.

Such a view worries me. I strongly believe that human and finance-resource management training should be fully integrated into the curriculum of any formation house worth the salt. Far from being a mere appendage that can be dispensed with at will, skills in managing human beings and finance resources should be fully embedded into the formation program alongside philosophy and theology.

When I look around me and see the increasing number of parishes in our country that are virtually run into the ground by priests, who are unable to manage the human and financial resources put at their disposal, I gasp in sorrow. Once these priests are raised to the level of bishops – and without a sound foundation in managing human beings and the finances of their dioceses – the result has been anything but flattering, to put it mildly. Need we mention names of archdioceses and dioceses that are facing acute financial and human management problems in our country today, all due to poor management by the local ordinary? They are there for all to see.

As someone who spent a good part of his professional life working in the human resource department of an international company, I can speak with first hand knowledge of the indispensable contribution of training to the overall human and material success of any institution – and the Church is no exception. Priests who receive little or no human and finance-management training during their formation years tend to act as if they own the parish assigned to them. Some, by no means all, consider the lay faithful with suspicion and those who dare question some of their decisions become the subject of sarcastic homilies from the pulpit. Not to mention the poor catechists or primary school teachers, who take the full brunt of the priest's anger when they dare ask why! With this class of parish workers, it is either the priest's way or the highway.

I believe that if during their formation years our priests receive intense training on how to lead teams, delegate authority (without losing it), manage the money at hand and their time well to avoid

being stressed out (and taking their stress out on poor catechists, primary school teachers and parishioners), they will lead God's flock entrusted to their care with joy. It is of vital importance, of course, for them to know that they are mere custodians, not the owners, of the parish funds put at their disposal. It is not uncommon to hear how many of them do mistake parish funds for their pocket allowances.

Once more, my views are merely those of a lay faithful of the Lord, who loves his Church and prays that God should send good (human and finance) managers to administer his vineyard. We, of course, pray that our priests not administer the people and the money for the Lord's vineyard so well that they forget the Lord of the vineyard himself. May they never fail to draw from the Tabernacle the divine inspiration that is indispensable for the smooth running of the Lord's vineyard. *Ad maiorem Dei gloriam!* All for your greater glory, O Lord. Amen.

Keep processions and the homily short

Many Catholic communities in Cameroon have adopted what is generally referred to as the “Lectionary Procession”. As an introduction to the Liturgy of the Word, the Lectionary is brought to the President of the Liturgical Assembly in a colourful procession, very often marked by song and dance. While the general populace delights in the singing and dancing that accompany this procession, some Christians find it too time-consuming and loudly call for such processions to be either tightly controlled or banned altogether. To know more, we asked Reverend Father Zephyrinus Mbuh, SD, a liturgical expert (liturgist) of the Diocese of Kumbo in the Bamenda Ecclesiastical Province of Cameroon, to throw more light on this issue.

Father, what is a Lectionary Procession?

The Roman Catholic Liturgy actually prescribes a procession with the Book of the Gospels, which takes place just before the proclamation of the Gospel. The term ‘Lectionary Procession’ was coined at the initiative of the Bamenda Ecclesiastical Province, which initiative came up in preparation for the visit of the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, in 1985. The argument in support of a ‘Lectionary Procession’ is that the Word of God is One – there is no separation between the First and/or Second Reading and the Gospel. This is definitely an initiative that has received Roman approval, even if practised for the most part on Cameroonian soil or by Cameroonians elsewhere around the world.

Some people find such processions rather long. Can't they be done much faster?

The question of precision and brevity in the Liturgy is something whose importance we cannot over emphasise. People do not come to Church because they have nothing else to do! Coming to Church is

only one of the items on their agenda, even if for many it is the most important item. The priest and any other person who has a role to play in the Liturgy must bear in mind the fact that people come to Church to spend quality time with God and with their brothers and sisters in worship. The Church is not a cinema hall, neither is it a funeral home! We need to animate the Liturgy in such a way that it is done with precision, reverence, and respect for the sacredness of the Church and its occupants.

The precise mark of respect given to the Word of God is not in the carrying of the Lectionary or the Book of the Gospels around, but in reading it and listening to it, such that it produces its desired effects in its readers and hearers. Spending so much time in bringing the Word of God in procession is definitely missing the mark! A Lectionary Procession that goes beyond 3 to 5 minutes becomes a distraction, no matter the occasion!

It sometimes takes quite a while for the Lectionary Procession to even start. What do you see as a solution to this problem?

The Lectionary Procession does not need to start from the back of the church. It should take place from as near the sanctuary as possible. Those taking part in the Lectionary Procession dress for Mass and not for the Lectionary Procession. In other words, they do not vest and unvest at the back of the Church while Mass is going on! They need to make sure that the attire they use for the Lectionary Procession is such that they can and will effectively use for the whole duration of the Mass. Whatever they carry in procession as symbols that give meaning to the procession and respect to the Word of God must be such that they can either keep near the Lectern or carry with them back to their seats. It is not apt for people to stand around the Lectern with peace plants, or any objects (themselves included), that block communication between the one proclaiming the Word of God and the Assembly. The proclamation of the Word of God should be done in a language that the people understand. In case of a mixed congregation, it might be useful to proclaim each reading in one and only one of the languages of the congregation.

Would you say that the Lectionary Procession is the sole culprit in the crime of time robbery in the Liturgy?

Not at all! The Entrance Procession, the Lectionary Procession, the Proclamation of the Readings, the Homily, the Prayer of the Faithful, the Offertory Procession and the Notices constitute a whole collection of collaborative time-killers. The Entrance Procession should be executed in such a way that the Sign of the Cross is taken when Mass is programmed to begin. If Mass is to begin at 9 o'clock, for instance, the Entrance Procession should not begin at 9 o'clock. This depends to a very great extent on the Master of Ceremonies, who should have a very clear idea of how long the Mass is intended to last and should make sure that each person who has a role to play fulfils his/her role within schedule.

Sometimes one has a feeling that such processions are not always well prepared given the confusion that always seems to reign among the procession participants themselves prior to, or during the procession.

You're right. The Liturgy, well prepared and executed, is in itself catechesis. It is definitely necessary for all who have a part to play in any Liturgical Assembly to come together and prepare well for the celebration. That is why it is always necessary to take time and rehearse our roles, even when we know them by heart. Imagine a non-Catholic who comes to the Catholic Church for the first time, and many do, and witnesses a Liturgical celebration characterised by wrong emphases! What would such a person go home with? If they came and witnessed a well prepared and celebrated Liturgy, they would go home edified to have witnessed the way Catholics celebrate.

Lengthy homilies pose quite a problem to many people too. What would you say is the "ideal" length of a homily?

A homily of 5 to 10 minutes is great. If it must be longer, it should be limited to 15 minutes; otherwise the preacher runs the risk of preaching for the archives. Not many speakers are capable of sustaining their audience's attention beyond 15 minutes.

I have been at Mass where up to seven people read the Prayer of the Faithful. Is that number of readers needed to bring the intentions of the faithful to the Father?

No, I don't think so. God hears the prayers of his sons and daughters when they pray in community and when they pray as individuals. As far as the Prayer of the Faithful is concerned, even if there are as many as 5 to 7 intentions, they can all be announced by one or two people. A group of 5 to 7 people is not necessary! It's too much of a crowd around the Lectern.

What should be the content of the Prayer of the Faithful?

It should include an intention for the Church and her Ministers, an intention for civil and traditional authorities, a few intentions for the needs of the worshipping community and its members. It is praiseworthy to give room for members of the Assembly to pray in silence for their other intentions, which have not yet been mentioned and then to seek the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The response to the intentions must be clear, precise and easy to memorise, whether it is recited or sung. Long and windy responses must be avoided to save time and also not to raise any doubts in the minds of the gathered faithful.

Tell us about the Offertory Procession. Is it necessary?

Wow! I can visualise parish priests ready to take up arms against you for a question like this! The Offertory Procession is not optional in any Mass. The Mass is a sacrifice and the bread and wine to be used for the sacrifice need to be presented by the people. This is the essence of the Offertory Procession. If there are monetary gifts and other gifts in kind to be offered along with the bread and wine, these derive their meaning and place from the offering of bread and wine and they should be offered with the same spirit – in generosity, reverence and respect. It is important for our people to realise that what matters is not how many times one approaches the alms basket in the same Mass, but how much one puts in it with love that springs from the very depth of one's being. With this understanding we do

not need to go to one particular alms basket/box but to the alms basket/box nearest to us as long as it serves the purpose of the collection. It is important to get sufficient alms baskets/boxes that meet the size of the congregation and to place them in strategic positions so that people do not need to travel long distances to offer their gifts. Even for the biggest of Masses the offertory procession should not take more than 20 to 30 minutes.

What I seem to hear you say, Father, and correct me if I'm wrong, is that the Mass can be kept short without losing its solemnity.

Solemnity comes from the respect and reverence that accompany diction and gestures in the Liturgy. The articulation of words in a natural way and the clarity of the sound system have a lot to contribute to solemnity and the attention of the worshipping community. Without losing sight of solemnity, we can conveniently limit weekday Masses to a maximum of 35 minutes; Sunday Masses to a maximum of 90 minutes, and the big occasional Masses to a maximum of 180 minutes.

What I have said here is not the Gospel of the Lord, but rather a collection of random and useful ideas that will go a long way to help us in our Liturgical Planning and Execution. We should, of course, not forget to mention the notices/announcements, which as a matter of principle, are given after the post-Communion Prayer. They should contain only a few points that are not in the Sunday Newsletter, or that need special emphasis. Notices that go beyond 5 minutes unnecessarily prolong the Liturgy.

Father, watch your health!

There are many interesting things to learn from Father Robert J. O'Neil's book entitled *Mission to the British Cameroons*, a book on the presence of the Mill Hill missionaries in the Cameroons. It was first published in 1991 by the Saint Joseph's Missionary Society in London. The bulk of the book is anchored on the towering figure of the Right Reverend Monsignor Peter Rogan, who spent 37 years of his life in active duty in the British Cameroons, from 1937 to 1962.

I had the opportunity to review Father O'Neil's book several years ago in the pages of the Catholic weekly, *L'Effort Camerounais*. Today, I am revisiting that book just to pick out one or two ideas for the purpose of this article, particularly what Father O'Neil calls Bishop Rogan's keen interest in the health of his priests. "When he (Bishop Rogan) visited mission stations, he took a keen interest in the health of his priests, always inspecting the kitchen (as he did while at his headquarters) and tossing any spoiled food out of the window. He used to say, 'put your money on the table and let the church fall down; you're more important than a mere building'" (p. 35).

Further in the book, we learn that "Peter Rogan often complained that his priests did not care for their health, never entering the kitchen to see how their food was prepared. On one occasion all three Mankon priests were sick and he blamed it on poor hygiene and a dirty kitchen. He admitted that Father Woodman was popular with his fellow priests but needed to take more interest in his "table" and kitchen" (p. 73).

Bishop Rogan was concerned, not only for the spiritual health of his priests, but for their physical wellbeing as well. That is why he could say openly "put your money on the table and let the church fall down; you're more important than a mere building." The physical health of people is just as important as the spiritual. This is more so when the people in question happen to be our priests. It is vitally

important that our priests remain in good physical health to attend to the spiritual needs of the people of God entrusted to their care.

We, the laity, sometimes pay more attention to the way our priests preach, or behave in society (their moral side) than to the way they look (physically). I was in Bambui the other day and seminarians of Saint Thomas Aquinas Major Seminary and some of their formators were engaged in an exciting football encounter. It was some kind of inter-house competition. Those slim and athletic young men were giving their all into that game. I remember remarking to my friend that if the good Lord could be so kind as to call all those young men into his vineyard, the Church that is in Cameroon would teem with a healthy presbyterium.

My friend, a little more cynical than me, said, “You see all these young athletic men; just wait two or three years after their ordination and you’ll see many of them pushing big tummies ahead of them. “ I looked up in surprise and he continued; “many of our priests, especially the younger ones, don’t take good care of their health these days and that’s unfortunate.”

Crude though his assertion sounded, I couldn’t help but agree with him that something seems to be amiss with some of our priests these days. They do not seem to take good care of their physical health. It may sound unfair to single out our priests as if they lived in isolation in society. Do we not all tend to live an abusive life-style these days, especially those of us living in cities like Douala and Yaoundé, with their fast-food restaurant mentalities? Then why, you may ask, am I singling out our priests for concern?

It is simply because the Church has never had enough priests. Our Blessed Lord himself asks us to pray to the Master of the harvest to send labourers into his vineyard, for the harvest is always more plentiful than the labourers (Mt 9:37-38). When our prayers are answered, we should do all in our power to ensure that those whom the Master deems worthy to serve his people remain healthy, not only spiritually, but physically as well.

Effective missionaries

Some of the most effective missionaries in the New Testament seem to be those individuals to whom our Blessed Lord restores the vitality of health by releasing them from the grips of Satan and disease. Once they recover their health, their joy is so great that no amount of warning or threat can silence them. Take the case of the man suffering from leprosy, who falls to his knees before the Lord and says, “if you are willing, you can cleanse me “(MK 1: 40) . Our compassionate Master feels sorry for him and reaches out and touches him saying, “I am willing, be cleansed “ (v.41), and at once the man is cured. Despite our Lord’s stern warning to him to go show himself to the priest only and to say nothing to anyone else, the cured man, in his excitement -- and who can blame him? -- rushes off and freely proclaims the great deeds of Christ to all, such that Jesus can no longer go openly into any town, but is forced to stay outside in deserted places (v.45). Physical health motivates and energises great missionary work.

Another good example is from Saint John’s Gospel (Jn 9:1-41), where Christ heals the man born blind by spitting on the ground, making a muddy paste and rubbing it on his eyes. He then advises the blind man to go and wash his face in the pool of Siloam. Once that is done, he recovers his eyesight, an occurrence that throws the priestly hierarchy of the ruling class in Jerusalem into total confusion. The Scribes and the Pharisees, refusing to admit the obvious, threaten the man with dire consequences should he continue to claim that Christ has healed him, but the man is adamant. To him, Christ is a prophet (v.17). He is finally thrown out of the synagogue but he stands his ground. Here is a man who unexpectedly recovers his health and throws all caution to the winds as he proclaims the wonders of our Lord’s action to the world. Christ could not have found a more ardent missionary than him. He is not afraid to lift his up voice, a voice resounding with health and strength. He lifts it up in praise of the Lord.

A physically healthy priest is a happy priest; a happy priest is a pleasant priest to have around; a pleasant priest to have around is a much more effective missionary than one who is unwell, who is sullen, and who is grouchy. Therefore, Father, take care of what you eat and drink. Take frequent walks around your parish. Organise sporting activities and encourage your parishioners to join in. Jog around your parish and encourage curious onlookers to join you. Take vacations. You will come back more energised and more enthusiastic to preach God's Word of salvation, in season and out of season. I find nothing more irritating than to hear a priest say, as I so often hear, "I'm too busy to take a vacation! There's too much work in my parish, so I can't go on vacation!"

Father, take the cue from His Eminence Christian Cardinal Tumi, the Emeritus Archbishop of Douala. When his vacation time comes, the man is gone! I recall the other day asking his secretary if he was around. The good lady looked at me, surprise in her eyes and said, "You've been working with this man for so long and you still don't know that he never jokes with his vacation? He's in Kumbo to see his mother." Then with a conspiratorial smile on her lips she added: "Mama's big baby!" and we both burst out in laughter, knowing we could poke fun at our bishop over his love for his mother without running the risk of being excommunicated.

The question is, if an archbishop can take time to go on vacation, why not his priests? What Bishop Rogan said several decades ago is still valid: Father, you are worth much more than the building entrusted to your care. So, protect your health. I make this supplication through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Giving to the Church is a Christian Duty

Not that long ago, Anglophone Christians of the Our Lady of Annunciation Parish in Bonamoussadi, Douala, met to reflect on ways and means of raising funds to renovate their church. I was asked to say a word on the theme, "Giving to the Church is a Christian Duty," and, in a nutshell, this is what I shared with my fellow Christians.

Sacred Scripture tells us that God created the world and everything in it, including man and woman, who were created in His own image and likeness (Gen 1:27). This means that God owns everything in the world, you and me included. He could have kept his creation and creatures to Himself. Nothing obliged Him to part with them. However, God, in His boundless generosity, entrusted his entire creation to man and woman, asking them to go and "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and the cattle, and over all the wild animals and all the creatures that crawl on the ground" (Gen 1:28).

By entrusting His entire creation to man and woman, God makes you and me the custodians or stewards of his creation. In the Old Testament, God's people, recognising their role as mere custodians or stewards of God's creation, decided to show their gratitude to God by returning to Him, through temple offerings, 10 percent of their income, and keeping 90 percent for themselves. This is where the concept of the tithe arose. In our day, we talk of giving a percentage of our yearly income to God in Church contribution. Even if the Church in our Archdiocese does not insist that we give a specific percentage of our income to the Church, we are still required to contribute to the upkeep of God's house.

The history of God's people tells us that back in 538 BC, the king of Persia, Cyrus, authorised the Israelites, who were just then returning from exile, to rebuild the Temple of Jerusalem. In the Book

of Ezra, the king tells his people that “All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord, the God of heaven, has given to me, and he has also charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah” (Ez 1:4).

This does not go down well with the neighbouring peoples, who are determined to disrupt the king’s project. It is then that a courageous prophet, Haggai, appears on the scene to encourage the people not to give up. "Is it time for you to dwell in your own panelled houses, while this house lies in ruins?" he asks the Jews, pointing to God's house. Then he urges them to go up into the hill country, bring timber, and build the house that the Lord may take pleasure in it (Hag 1: 4. 8).

You would think the prophet Haggai was appealing to the Christians of Bonamoussadi today as we too face this great challenge to give God’s house a new and better look. If you listen well, you will hear the prophet urging you and me to go up to the hill country and bring back timber for the renovation of this God’s house.

Some of us may wonder what timber the Lord has in mind. Well, it can be timber in kind or in cash. If you pledge money, that will be your own timber. It can also be real timber, log and wood, for the rafters, the windows or the doors. It can be timber in terms of the time you are able to give by participating in deliberations around this Church project. It can be timber in the professional advice you can give us. Some of us are lawyers, accountants, or security experts. Your input in your domain is your own timber.

When the first Christian missionaries came to our land, they did everything for us and we were mere spectators, watching from the sidelines. We were, for the most part, not well educated to assume responsibility for building our own churches, schools and hospitals. The mentality was created that all such structures were the responsibility of the priest alone, who was, for the most part, a white priest.

Many of us still unfortunately continue to think this way. It was understandable in those days when European missionaries could bring money from their own country and build churches, schools,

colleges, and hospitals for us. But today, who do we have as our parish priest? Father Ignatius Musi, S.J., from Njindom in the Northwest Region! He is one of us. We saw him grow up among us as a seminarian; today, he is our parish priest. Do we expect him to go to his parents to get money with which to renovate our church? This is where we hear the prophet Haggai challenging us to go up to the hill country ourselves and bring our own timber to build God's house here in Bonamoussadi.

The Servant of God, Pope Paul VI, the first reigning Pontiff ever to visit Africa, challenged the Church that is in Africa from Kampala, Uganda, on 31 July 1969, when he made his now famous speech, urging us, Africans, to become more proactive in our own missionary responsibility. "By now," he said, "you Africans are missionaries to yourselves." And we are glad Paul VI was wrong! Africans are no longer missionaries just to themselves; they have become missionaries to the whole world, and are now even actively evangelising the very source of Christianity itself! As vocations shrivel from European countries, from where the light of Christianity came to Africa, they are booming in Africa.

Paul VI was visionary enough to see that European countries would soon suffer from donor fatigue and would no longer easily fund missionary activities in Africa. That is why he was asking us to take over responsibility for the building and running of our own churches. And we see that he was right in that regard. European donors are increasingly reluctant to cough up money to help us construct our own churches, schools, and hospitals.

A view similar to Paul VI's was recently expressed by his successor, the Servant of God, John Paul II. In his Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, he also challenges us, Africans, to take possession of our own churches through what he calls "inter-parish cooperation", where wealthier parishes of each diocese help the less fortunate ones. "It is therefore urgent," writes the Holy Father, "that the particular Churches in Africa have the objective of providing for their own needs as soon as possible, thereby assuring their self-sufficiency" (*Ecclesia in Africa*, 104).

This has not gone unheeded by the leaders of our particular church. Whenever our Archbishop Emeritus, Christian Cardinal Tumi, visits a parish he deems better off than others, he always urges them to show solidarity with the poorer parishes. It is not rare for him to come down from the altar after Mass, pick up a basket and stand in front of the congregation to collect funds for the poorer parishes.

We should also be guided by Saint Paul's example. Writing to his converts of Corinth, he expresses words of praise for the churches of Macedonia that have come to the rescue of the poorer churches of Jerusalem. "For they gave according to their means, (...), of their own free will, begging earnestly for the favour of taking part in the relief" of the poorer churches (2 Cor 8:3-4). He then declares, "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully," before adding his now famous and often quoted saying: "God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor 9: 6-7).

So, my brothers and sisters, helping to build God's house is a Christian duty. God is not asking you to give all that you have to Him. No, He is merely asking that you return to Him a small percentage of what He has given you through the Church of his Son, Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ here in Bonamoussadi. As you drop your coin into that till, our Blessed Lord will be watching and telling his disciples that your contribution is worth much more than the excesses from the wallets of the rich because from your poverty you have offered all that you have to God (Lk 21:3-4).

The Catholic Church and the Reunification of Cameroon

When we talk of the Reunification of Cameroon, the mind almost always goes to the political machinations that led two political entities, separated by 40 years of historical forces beyond their control, to come together in one room in Fumban in what has come to be known as the “Fumban Conference” (July 17 – 21, 1961).

There, they cautiously observed each other, then timidly shook hands across the table, before weakly embracing each other and agreeing to form a Federal Republic of Cameroon. Finally, in 1972, through what some joyously celebrate as a “Peaceful Revolution” while others, a vocal minority, decry as pure re-colonisation and/or enslavement, the federal system, the basis of reunification, was scrapped from the history books.

As those political intrigues were going on, what was happening in the Catholic Church in Cameroon? At Reunification in 1961, a number of indigenous clergy was already well in place on both sides of the Mungo. Francophone Cameroon already had an indigenous bishop, Monsignor Paul Etoga. Ordained bishop in 1955, he served for several years as the Bishop of Mbalmayo. He was also the first indigenous bishop in Francophone Africa.

The Reunification year, 1961, saw Mgr. Jean Zoa being elevated to the rank of Archbishop of the Metropolitan See of Yaounde. It was the same year that two young men were ordained priests to the Diocese of Buea, who would, a decade later, both be elevated to the rank of bishop, being the first indigenous Anglophone priests to head dioceses. They were Father Paul Verdzekov, today in heaven, ordained the first Bishop of the Diocese of Bamenda (November 8, 1970) and, twelve years later, the first Archbishop of the Metropolitan See of Bamenda (March 18, 1982), and Father Pius Suh Awa, ordained the first Cameroonian Bishop of the Diocese of Buea (May 31, 1971), today of blessed memory.

As politicians were jockeying for positions of influence and power in the new Federal Republic, there seemed to be little or no visible “cross fertilisation” between the local Churches on both sides of the Mungo. The bishops undoubtedly held joint meetings to discuss issues of mutual concern to their respective dioceses, but it was not until the creation of St. Thomas Aquinas Major Seminary (STAMS) in Bambui in 1973 that a one-way movement began to make its way from Francophone dioceses, especially Douala, to STAMS. The then Rector of STAMS, Father Christian Tumi, today a Cardinal Priest of the Church of Rome, and the Emeritus Archbishop of Douala, admitted the first Francophone seminarians to STAMS during his tenure of office (1973-1979).

Today, one of the first seminarians admitted from Douala is serving the Church of God in Eseka as a diocesan bishop. He is Mgr. Dieudonné Bogmis, ordained bishop on April 10, 1999, being the first product of STAMS to be elevated to the rank of bishop in Cameroon. Since then, nearly all other dioceses in Francophone Cameroon have been sending seminarians to STAMS each year.

The rhythm of Francophone arrival in STAMS accelerated when its first Rector, who had become the Bishop of Yagoua and later Archbishop of Garoua, Christian Cardinal Tumi, continued to send seminarians from those northern dioceses to train as priests in STAMS. His successor to Yagoua, Mgr. Immanuel Bushu, who had also earlier succeeded Cardinal Tumi as STAMS’ Rector, continued the tradition of sending seminarians from Yagoua to STAMS. Cardinal Tumi’s successor to the Metropolitan See of Garoua, His Grace Archbishop Antoine Ntalou, also kept up the same tradition begun by his predecessor, that of sending candidates for the priesthood from Garoua to STAMS. Today, just about every diocese in Francophone Cameroon has, or has had, one or more priests formed in STAMS.

Curiously, the reverse trend of candidates for the priesthood leaving from Anglophone Cameroon to Francophone Cameroon is not happening. I wondered why this seemingly one-sided move from East to West? For an answer, I went to someone who knows the

formation of priests well, having served in STAMS for ten years, six of those years as Rector. He is the Auxiliary Bishop of Bamenda, His Excellency Mgr. Agapitus Nfon. I began by asking him why this seeming reluctance on the part of the Bishops of the Ecclesiastical Province of Bamenda to send seminarians for formation east of the Mungo.

His Lordship told me that there are two separate traditions of priestly formation in the country. The Mill Hill missionaries, who had taken over control of the Church in English-speaking Cameroon from the German Pallotine missionaries in the 1920s, had put in place a system of formation that lays great emphasis on a life of communion. Priests learn to live together, share things in common and pray together. Bishops ensure that priests are never sent to parishes alone and those living in the same area check on each other. The diocese, in turn, takes care of their material and especially health needs too. The Francophone system of priestly formation is different in that priests are left very much to their own devices after ordination. So their formation does not prepare them for communal life, whereas ours does.

I asked if the bishops of the Ecclesiastical Province of Bamenda were thinking of sending some of their seminarians eastward anytime soon, at least to have a feel of what it is like this side of the country so that when they come back home they can then take care of the spiritual needs of Francophone faithful working west of the historic divide. His Lordship doubted that such a scenario could come up anytime soon. What could likely happen, he thought, is for some English-speaking seminarians to go East, learn French for a few years during their philosophy years, then come back to STAMS for Theology and final ordination. "It is important for our candidates for the priesthood not to lose touch with other seminarians with whom they will serve as priests, if they finally receive the call," he explained.

"Don't forget," His Lordship continued, "that bishops east of the Mungo felt the pressure of the massive arrival of Anglophones into their dioceses soon after reunification, especially in Douala and Yaounde. They knew that they would have to take care of the

spiritual needs of the new arrivals, and the best way was for them to send young seminarians to us for training. When they return and are ordained priests, they then serve the Anglophone faithful living with them in the language they best understand, and in a tradition they are familiar with. For our part, we never had to face such an influx of Francophones to our own side of the country,” he concluded.

The Auxiliary Bishop’s views on this one-sided movement echo those of His Eminence Christian Cardinal Tumi, the Emeritus Archbishop of Douala, who has always been very appreciative of the efforts his predecessor, His Grace Simon Tonye, made to open Anglophone parishes in the city of Douala and entrust them into the care of English-speaking priests. He also lauds his predecessor’s foresight in sending seminarians for formation to Bambui and other parts of the English-speaking world. The fruits of those efforts are clearly visible and strongly felt in the Catholic Church that is Douala where a sizeable number of priests, originally French-speaking, speak English well, and attend to the needs of the Church and God’s people in English.

So, it does seem that behind a united episcopate in our country, still lie two markedly different systems of priestly formation. One, west of the Mungo, clinging jealously to its long-established tradition of forming priests, with emphasis on communal life, and the other, east of the divide, with a much looser approach, priests being ordained and left very much to feign for themselves. All for greater glory of God Almighty.

I remember Father Paul Verdzekov

“Are we praying to Bishop Paul, or for Bishop Paul?” Christian Cardinal Tumi, the Emeritus Archbishop of Douala, wondered as he paid his friend, Bishop Paul Verdzekov, the Emeritus Archbishop of Bamenda, his last tribute on February 13, 2010. As days blend into weeks, and weeks into months, and soon months into a year since Bishop Paul Verdzekov left us unexpectedly, I too wonder with Cardinal Tumi whether to pray to him or for him.

As days go by, a persistent feeling of something undone continues to gnaw my entrails. Since Father Paul left us, I have not been able to pay him a tribute, in my own way, as many have done. And I know that the more I try to ignore this feeling, the deeper it will continue growing and clouding my mind. This is a strange feeling, given that I was not particularly close to Bishop Paul who, some years ago, had expressed the wish to be called ‘Father Paul,’ not ‘Bishop Paul’, as a way of being closer to the people of God entrusted to his pastoral care. In fact, I only came to meet him fairly often after Christian Cardinal Tumi entrusted the management of the Catholic printing press, MACACOS, to me from 2004 till I stepped down in 2008. This period also largely coincided with the years of Father Paul’s retirement from the head of the Archdiocese of Bamenda when he came to rest in Douala more frequently than before.

First encounter

Sometime back in 1969, the government transferred the Federal Bilingual Grammar School from its original site at Man O'War Bay, some five miles west of the coastal town of Victoria, to its present location in Molyko, Buea. I was then in Form 5 and preparing to write the London General Certificate of Education 'O' Level examination. My mind was entirely focused on that exam and nowhere near anything religious.

That is why I was not too keen when my childhood friend, Emmanuel Konglim, today also with his Maker, came to tell me, a broad smile spanning his face, that he had met a young Nso priest in Buea. His name was Reverend Father Paul Verdzekov. That name did not ring a bell in my mind and I merely shrugged my shoulders in total indifference.

Unlike Emmanuel, an exuberant, out-going individual, who was always much at ease around people of a certain class in Church or in civil life, I am rather shy and happy when I can pass anywhere unnoticed. Emmanuel was always at the forefront of encounters and took a boyish delight in giving details of his encounter with people, be they in the ruling circles of the Church or in political and academic circles. “One thing you’d really like with Father Paul Verdzekov,” he said, pulling out a copy of a magazine from his bag, “is this: Cameroon Panorama. He’s the Editor-in-Chief.”

Emmanuel knew how excited I always was when it came to reading newspapers and magazines. In fact, one of my classmates, today a corporate lawyer in Uncle Sam’s land, once accused me of succeeding in my exams with the help of black magic, commonly called ‘mungang’. His reasoning was that while others were busy studying, I was, more often than not, to be seen reading newspapers and magazines in the library. But when the time for tests or exams came, I always did well. He therefore concluded that I was surely making recourse to ‘mungang’. He even wondered if I did not have ‘an Indian ring’ hidden somewhere in my person. There was much talk of some students ordering ‘magical rings’ from India to help them pass exams.

His views did come as a shock to me, but they were not enough to discourage me from first heading for the newspaper section whenever I went to the library, which was often. Emmanuel knew my weakness for the press, especially as I was also on the editorial team of a slim school publication that did not survive the school censorship for too long. In fact, when one of our ‘budding journalists’ thought he had seen what looked like the shadow of one of our teachers hovering in one dark corner in the neighbouring

CDC camps, where teachers and some of the bigger school boys reportedly clashed over women of ill-repute, the publication was banned and some of us were nearly tossed out of school for spreading “false rumours”.

Attack on tyranny

As soon as I laid my hand on the copy of the Cameroon Panorama that Emmanuel had given me, I immediately browsed through the editorial. I was struck by the robust and virulent attack on the elections that had just taken place in the Bokassa-created-and-ruled Central African Empire. Under the pen-name “Barah Mbiybe”, Father Paul openly denounced what he called the “election buffoonery” in that unfortunate Central African country. That was the first time I saw the word “buffoonery” and I immediately rushed for my dictionary, nodding my head in admiration.

Those were days when Ahmadou Ahidjo ruled Cameroon with a heavy-fisted, Bismarckian “blood-and-iron” conviction. Under no circumstance did he take kindly to any views that might smack of even the slightest criticism of his rule, or that of a fellow dictator, especially one in his backyard, like Bokassa or Mobutu. We all trembled for Father Paul as we read his open denunciation of African rulers who trampled afoot the basic rights of their people. It was easy to see the fist-punches Father Paul was sending also landing firmly on Ahidjo’s own ribs. We knew it would be a miracle for the censors, seasoned on intolerance and notorious for press- bashing, not to reveal their fangs to the young priest, sooner rather than later.

When I expressed my admiration for the magazine, Emmanuel smiled and said he knew I would like him. He then announced that Father Paul was coming to say Mass at our school. I looked at him as if he had just lost his mind. Our school was a government school and I could not imagine a Catholic priest being authorised to say Mass on campus. I asked if he understood the implications of what he was saying.

“I’ve already talked with the Discipline Master (“Surveillant Général”), and he’s already given his consent. He’s a Catholic, you

know!" That was the first time I heard that our discipline master, noted for his sarcastic remarks, and who did not miss an occasion to send a well-aimed kick into a student's behind, was a Catholic. "If he's a Catholic, why don't you advise him to go to a priest and confess his sins of wickedness? That fellow is Hitler in disguise," I said, recalling one instance when he gave me a humiliating knock on the head in front of Form 1 students. Imagine a Form 5 student being humiliated in front of 'foxes'! For an answer, Emmanuel merely smiled and said he was not that bad.

Holy Mass at school

Soon after breakfast the following Sunday, Emmanuel took a taxi up to Small Soppo and before long, a white Renault-4 car drove into the school yard. I was still wondering whether to attend the Mass or not. But then curiosity overcame my resistance and I walked to the classroom where a handful of people were already waiting. A hastily improvised altar, consisting of a teacher's table, had been covered with a white sheet while another table at the corner held the chalice and other Mass accessories.

When I walked in, Emmanuel, who had already vested himself with an altar boy's vestment, came to me and literally pulled me by the hand to meet the young priest. It was clear that he had already talked to him about me for Father Paul immediately shook my hand and said: "Oh, you're Kenjo's brother, aren't you?" he asked in a low voice, a shy smile dancing at the corner of his lips. I said I was and he immediately praised my brother's writing skills, adding that he hoped I too would write as well as he did. I do not remember what my response was, but I began to warm up to him. He did not seem that bad, after all.

That morning, we all felt that Father Paul took Holy Mass seriously. His homily was well prepared and neatly typed out. To crown it all, he suddenly, and unexpectedly, switched from English to French and delivered the same homily in impeccable French. There we were, staring dumbfounded and with open mouths as a young priest switched from English to French and back to English, with

such remarkable fluidity! And to think that we loudly prided ourselves as the only bilingual Cameroonians throughout the Republic! Father Paul's language ability served as quite a lesson in humility to us.

No sooner was the Mass over than Father Paul's language ability began to make the rounds of the school. Those who heard him repeated what they had heard to those who were not there, spicing their stories with elements of exaggeration. The result of this publicity was clearly visible the following Sunday when the room was packed full long before the young priest arrived. Those who came late crowded around the windows and door and the rest followed the Mass in the courtyard. At the front of the class, sat the "Surveillant Général" himself. He had obviously picked up rumours of the young priest's performance of the previous Sunday and wanted to be present to see for himself. And he was not disappointed at all.

In fact, for the rest of the year, he never missed Mass and always cited the young priest as an example of a perfectly bilingual individual. He would always tell a student, who was fumbling in French or English, to go up to the young priest in Small Soppo for lessons in either French or English. Emmanuel, who was closer to the young priest than the rest of us, fed us with more of Father Paul's linguistic exploits, telling everyone how easily he could also switch from Italian to Latin, or German, or Portuguese at a moment's notice! Father Paul's reputation soared to the sky among the teachers and students alike. Outstanding among his visible traits was his remarkable humility. He would smile shyly before making a remarkably profound point in simple straightforward English or French.

Father Paul becomes Bishop Paul

The following year, 1970, I gained admission into the Cameroon College of Arts, Science and Technology (CCAST), Bambili and lost touch with him, until one day I heard on radio that he had been appointed the first indigenous bishop of the newly created Diocese of Bamenda. I remember sharing that news with some of the students, who had been with me the year before in Buea, and one of

them graphically described his appointment as a log of wood falling before a man with a sharp ax!

On the day of his outdoor ordination in Bamenda, I was among several thousands of lay faithful, clergy and curiosity-seekers, who thronged the location. Even though I was a little too far off to the side to see what was going on, I felt the intensity of the occasion deeply. I remember the then Father Pius Awa, a classmate of Father Paul's, who would later also become the first indigenous bishop of the Diocese of Buea, who acted as the Master of Ceremony, telling the excited crowd: "Na wuna bishop dis. From now, Bishop Julius Peeters he power for Bamenda don finish." The shout of joy that rose from that assembled crowd must have been heard several dozens of miles away. I looked up and saw the newly ordained bishop on a chair, a mitre on his head and a crozier in his right hand, looking really majestic.

Shortly after this ordination ceremony, the Cameroon government made a dramatic announcement: it had arrested Bishop Albert Ndongmo of Nkongsamba for treason, a term which became synonymous with a sure death sentence in the Ahidjo days. The then dreaded Jean Forchive, Ahidjo's infamous torture-master, a man who boasted to the world that he would not hesitate to torture even his own mother, if she were even merely suspected of endangering "state security", came on radio to rudely interrogate Bishop Ndongmo.

The sentence of that trial shocked the world: Bishop Ndongmo was sentenced to death, a sentence that was later commuted to life imprisonment under pressure from the international community. Bishop Ndongmo was later 'pardoned' and forced into exile in Canada, where he ended his days on earth. Irony of ironies, the man who tried, sentenced and exiled him became himself the object of a trial for treason. He too was sentenced to death, and chased off into exile. While Bishop Ndongmo is buried in his Cathedral in Nkongsamba, Ahidjo, his arch enemy, lies abandoned on foreign soil. How low the mighty do often fall!

Shortly after his ordination, the young Bishop Paul Verdzekov led a delegation of Cameroon's bishops to Ahidjo on behalf of

Bishop Ndongmo. It is not clear what they told the dreaded Ahidjo, nor what the latter's reaction was, but it is of significant historical importance that it was a young man, a newly ordained bishop, who stood with courage before an unforgiving dictator to speak on behalf of a falsely accused colleague. It is unfortunate that Father Paul passed on just when he was said to be working on a book in which he intended to denounce the Ndongmo trial as a sham and a travesty of justice. His biographer may reveal what his findings were to us.

Father Paul and I

As I mentioned earlier, I did not have any particular relationship with Father Paul Verdzekov apart from one of a lay faithful, who happened to have had the privilege of occasionally meeting him at close quarters. I remember meeting him on a number of occasions at Doctor Bernard Nsokika Fonlon's residence in Yaoundé back in the 1970s. I was then one of Doctor Fonlon's students at the University of Yaoundé. I heard a lot about him from Doctor Fonlon, who was always very proud of his primary school pupil, who had risen to the rank of Archbishop of the Holy Roman Church. Father Paul was one of Doctor Fonlon's primary school pupils back in the forties and Doctor Fonlon always had great words of praise for his former student's intellectual prowess.

When I came back home in the mid-eighties, after several years of studies abroad, writing, especially in newspapers, was already one of my intimate exercises. I wrote frequently and extensively, especially in English newspapers, notably the English version of Cameroon Tribune. This was before President Biya began to grudgingly loosen his iron grip on press freedom and reluctantly tolerate newspapers and magazines of differing political coloration.

In the late 1980's, some Anglophone journalists launched a magazine entitled Cameroon Life and invited me onboard. It was later that Father Paul Verdzekov told me that he was an ardent reader of some of the things I wrote in that magazine, which was quite a reference document among the Anglophone intelligentsia in this country.

I recall an interview I had in an issue of that magazine with one distributor of condoms in Cameroon, an American, who took much delight in marketing his product through our magazine. A few weeks later, I received a package from the Archdiocese of Bamenda with a letter from the Archbishop himself. Accompanying that letter was a book entitled *The War Against Population* by Jacqueline Kasun. It is an enlightening study, debunking the often held over-population myth, which abortionists and other population controllers use to justify their war on unborn babies. Father Paul wanted me to see for myself the true facts about population control as against the false claims made by the condom seller in his interview.

I recall another article I wrote urging the Yaoundé University authorities to rename the University of Yaoundé as “The Bernard Nsokika Fonlon University.” It appeared in a fairly obscure tabloid in Douala, whose publisher had been on my back for months to write for his paper. I remember sending a copy of that paper to Father Paul Verdzekov and, to my utter surprise and delight, he sent me a handwritten letter, praising my contribution to journalism in Cameroon. I valued that letter so much that I carried it around with me for years, and I'm sure I can still find it among the jumble of boxes I have stashed in my garage.

More frequent meetings

When Christian Cardinal Tumi invited me, in the late nineties, to join the team that was to revive the Catholic weekly, *L'Effort camerounais*, I received many words of greetings and praise from Father Paul. Whenever we met, he would always greet me with the words: “Martin, thank you very much for what you and your team are doing for the Catholic press.”

Later, when he retired from the Metropolitan See of Bamenda, he came to Douala a little more frequently than before. I would often meet him in the Bishop's House and we would talk at length about the press, the country and my work as the General Manager of the Catholic Media House, MACACOS. Then I would hear the same word of appreciation: “Martin, thank you for what you're doing for

the press and for the help you're giving Cardinal Tumi." Then he would tell me the latest book(s) he was reading. He was such an avid reader!

The last time we met, which was a few months before his death, he was reading a book by the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI. He seemed to enjoy it, smiling shyly before giving me a description of what it was all about.

Father Paul, as I pen these few words of mine about you, I feel a sense of relief descending on me. Not that long ago, I had been invaded by a feeling of uneasiness, which I knew would only disappear if I shared my thoughts of you with others. It is true that I did not know you that well but the few times we met and exchanged views on issues of civil or religious life, I left feeling truly enlightened.

I pray to you, Father Paul, because I know that you are in heaven, where people imbued, as you were, with goodness towards all, receive their rewards. When my own time runs out, I hope our Lord will also open the room for me in which you, Professor Fonlon, my brother Kenjo and my friend Emmanuel Konglim, presently reside, exchanging notes on issues of importance to the world in which you now live. Father Paul, pray for me. Amen.

The devastating consequences of abortion

The former US President, Ronald Reagan, once said that he found it strange that all those who are militating for abortion have already been born. They were given a chance to live but are now depriving others of the wonderful gift of life from God Almighty, who creates us all in His own image (Gen 1:27). Life is sacred from the moment of conception till natural death, and wilfully interrupting human life, even in the mother's womb, does, in the long run, bring untold agony to the woman.

I have been reflecting on this issue of abortion ever since I read in the Catholic weekly, *L'Effort camerounais*, of a book recently launched in Bamenda, under the tutelage of the occupant of the Metropolitan See of Bamenda, His Grace Archbishop Cornelius Fontem Esua, entitled *Myriam, why are you crying?* It was originally written in German in 1996 by a Swiss author, Pious Stossel, a member of a pro-life foundation called Yes to Life International. The report talks of participants focusing attention on the devastating effects of abortion, especially on the woman, several years after the act.

The long-term, tragic consequences of abortion hit me forcefully a few years ago at the International Airport in Douala. Not that I witnessed an abortion in progress but I ran into a woman who had aborted her daughter well over thirty years previously and was still suffering from the consequences of her action.

I was waiting for my daughter, who was coming back home on vacation. I saw a woman who looked familiar staring at me, a smile on her face. She saw that I didn't recognise her and walked up to me: "You probably don't recognise this old face. I am Mrs...." I protested that she did not look that old at all, although it was obvious that age, in its pitiless march, had carved out rings around her eyes that were clearly visible despite a thick coating of meticulously applied make-up.

Her name did not ring a bell until she called her maiden name and reminded me that we had been together at the University of Yaoundé in the mid-seventies. Oh, yes! I remembered her then. She was majoring in English and I was in the Bilingual Degree programme. We had had a few classes together. We had not met each other since leaving university well over thirty years previously.

The first thing she said when she saw my daughter was “Martin, you already have such a big girl?” That question took me by surprise because yours truly is far from being a young man! I would have thought that she would be asking how many grandchildren I already had! I reminded her that the grey on my hair was not a result of some powder someone might have taken delight in sprinkling on my head and beard while I snored contentedly away, but that it was truly the result of age-coated wisdom.

She smiled gently but then I noticed that she looked quite sad all of a sudden. I did not know what to make of her sudden change of mood, but then she turned to me abruptly and said that if her own daughter had lived she would be almost thirty years old. I said I was sorry to hear that she had lost her daughter. Had she been ill? I asked, not quite knowing what else to say. “No, she wasn’t ill, I aborted her!”

I was totally taken aback by what she said. I did not think anyone could be so frank about her role in killing an unborn baby! If her daughter had died a natural death, I would have expressed my condolences to comfort her. But, there she was, the author of her daughter’s own death nearly thirty years ago!! I was frankly lost for words. Was I right to pass judgement on her? I wondered.

Then she turned to look at me, tears glistening in her eyes, and spat out the name of her daughter’s father, someone I knew well, who had just retired from a lucrative job in a foreign organisation in America. They had been an ‘ideal’ couple in those days when some of us even feared to ask a girl out in case she said ‘Yes!’ and you would not know what next to talk to her about.

“Yes, you know him, don’t you?” she asked rather aggressively. I said I did. “Yes, he forced me to kill my daughter. I find it difficult to

forgive him! Now, he's had children with his wife and I am here with none". The tears were now flowing uncontrollably. I was stunned and stood in silence, not knowing what to do, or say.

She then calmed down, asked me to excuse her and said that even though she later married someone else, she was not able to give him a child. Her husband, as was to be expected, had brought in another younger woman, who had given him two sons. All his attention was now entirely focused on his younger wife and children, and the woman, standing head bowed at the airport that day, an island of remorse, was just a lonely and sad figure, forgotten at one corner of his house. Even though she herself held an enviable position in a foreign bank in a neighbouring country, she carried the guilt feeling all her life because she, willingly or unwillingly, had destroyed a human life, that of an unborn child, nearly thirty years previously. How sad!

Justice and Peace Commission – Bamenda Archdiocese

The Justice and Peace Commission of the Archdiocese of Bamenda has been striving to bring peace, justice and reconciliation to crisis-stricken areas of the Northwest Region of Cameroon where inter-village and inter-tribal conflicts are recurrent. It has also scored successes at the level of individuals by rescuing victims of human trafficking from their ordeal and successfully bringing charges against a notorious human trafficker and landing her in jail. Women and children, the principal victims of human traffickers, hold centre stage in the Commission's activities. Laura Anyola Tufon, who heads the Bamenda Archdiocesan Justice and Peace Commission, and is also a member of Cameroon's National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms, tells us more about the activities of the Justice and Peace Commission of the Archdiocese of Bamenda.

Your Commission is fast gaining a reputation throughout the country for its robust activities in the area of conflict management in the Northwest Region. Tell us about your activities.

The Justice and Peace Commission of the Archdiocese of Bamenda works to defend the weak, the poor and the marginalised because these are people who are usually not aware of their rights and tend to resign themselves to their fate. Our work, however, is not limited to this class of people alone since all is not about material and physical strength but also about transforming the mindset of people to treat others with dignity. No individual is more human than another simply on the grounds that he or she is stronger or richer. We have realised in the course of our work that even those who act strong and with impunity are, in fact, feeble and weak in mind. At times such people even suffer more from their actions than those considered weak.

Our Commission works in tandem with other Justice and Peace Commissions at the national, regional and continental level. Like all Catholic Peace and Justice Commissions, we take our orientation from the Pontifical Council for Justice Peace of the Universal Church in Rome. Our work is inspired by the Gospels and the Social Teaching of the Church.

We also work in the field of confidence building. Over the years, we have been able to build confidence in people, communities and some social structures, and that is what has given us the reputation we seem to enjoy now. We touch on very sensitive issues and undertake meaningful projects that touch the very essence of life by working for justice, peace building and sustainable development.

At the moment, we are focusing attention on the Post Synod message of the Church on the theme “The Church at the Service of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace”. Our aim, of course, is to see how we can translate the recommendations of the Synod Fathers into reality at our local level.

What part of the Synod Fathers’ message relates directly to Justice and Peace?

The entire message relates to justice and peace and all that revolves around them (conflict resolution, peace building, post-conflict reconstruction, reconciliation, respect for human rights, fight against human trafficking, etc.). When we talk of reconciliation, for example, we examine ways and means of bringing the Gospel message of reconciliation to the practical level of our social, cultural or religious realities. If two people from neighbouring villages fight over a piece of land, which is so common in our region of the country, and if some people are killed in the process, the challenge becomes how to bring those parties around the table and enable them talk it out. If nothing is done, it may seem for a while that there is peace but resentment is simmering below the surface. The children listen to their parents expressing frustration and resentment against the other parties and they themselves grow up knowing that the

members of the other village are their enemies, and they, in turn, will be tempted to carry this enmity to the next generation.

You mention inter-village and inter-tribal conflicts that are so recurrent and widespread in the Northwest Region of our country. What accounts for such frequent skirmishes between neighbouring villages and tribes?

You're right, the Northwest Region of our country has gained the unflattering reputation as the hotbed of inter-village and inter-tribal conflicts. You'll recall that not so long ago, the Bali Nyonga people clashed with their neighbours, the Bawok, and homes were looted and destroyed, and thousands of villagers became internally displaced people. That was sad to see. Around the same time, the people of Oku were sparring with their neighbours from Mbessa. No sooner were those skirmishes brought under control than another one flared up in Ndop between the Balikumbat and Bambalang. You ask what the main cause of these frequent conflicts is; well, there may not be just one reason, but the principal one is land. Arable land is becoming more and more scarce as the population grows and exerts pressure on the available land. The population survives mainly on subsistence agriculture and when people feel, rightly or wrongly, that their neighbours are encroaching on their own part of the land, tempers flare up and before long it is open warfare.

One would normally not expect an organ of the Church, like the Justice and Peace Commission, to intrude into a domain that seems reserved exclusively for the State; after all, maintaining law and order falls squarely on the shoulders of government, not the Church.

You're right that the State is the principal police of law and order. However, the Church is, in a way, a partner with the State in ensuring that peace, justice and reconciliation reign in our land. That said, let me hasten to add that it was the State that came to us to help resolve the said conflicts. In the case of the Bali Nyonga and Bawok land dispute, the Senior Divisional Officer (SDO) of Mezam Division at the time, who was a Catholic and had been a member of the Justice and Peace Commission of the Diocese of Nkongsamba, requested

permission from the Church authority for the Justice and Peace Commission of our Archdiocese to work hand in hand with the administration to resolve the recurring conflict between the two villages. That is how our Commission, with the permission of the Local Ordinary, came to work with the public authority to resolve that conflict.

Are you satisfied that peace has now come to stay between the Bali and Bawok villages?

We hope and pray that peace and reconciliation are now the watchwords between those villages. Let me hasten to add here that reconciliation is a process, not an achievement. We don't fold our arms and say that peace and reconciliation have been achieved once and for all; no, we continue to educate the people on how to respect members of the opposite side, to see them, not as enemies, but as brothers and sisters, children of the same God, who created us all in his own image and likeness. We avoid laying blame on any party or treating one party as bad and the other good. We strive for a win-win resolution of the conflict, wherever and whenever possible.

No sooner had you resolved the conflict between the Bali Nyonga and Bawok villages than another one flared up between the Balikpapan and Bambilang villages in Ndop and again the Justice and Peace Commission was on the ground. What happened in Ndop?

We're still talking of land conflict here. It's rather unfortunate that many people tend to label the Bali man as a warrior. This is an unfortunate stigma (words that kill) in conflict management. When you label a party to a conflict with such a negative stigma, they immediately go on the defensive, making reconciliation difficult. Our approach is to downplay any negative reference to any party and to help parties see each other as human beings, not as killers or victims. That is why when we go to the field, we assess the situation, find out the immediate as well as the long term causes of the conflict and then notify the administration of our finding. It is they who have the authority – the police, the army – to take action as deemed

appropriate. Even though the administration has the powers to act on its own, it still needs the support of civil society organisations, like ours, and the Church to reassure and calm the people involved.

In practical terms, how do you go about the reconciliation process in such conflict situations, especially when the protagonists have been harbouring resentment against each other for long periods of time?

One of the first things we do in peace building or conflict resolution is to create space where the protagonists in the conflict can meet and vent out their feelings. Such a space, preferably on neutral territory, enables them to talk first before any action is taken to resolve the problem. For example, if the administration steps in with its forces of law and order and decide that they are going to demarcate the boundary between two villages in conflict, without first creating space for them to talk and let out their anger, they will merely be postponing the conflict which, sooner or later, will flare up again. I believe the administration is aware of this and that is why they usually stay in the background as much as possible, leaving the way clear for us to calm down the tempers, create space for people to talk before taking any action. They keep their forces in the background and this eliminates the fear people may have to vent out their feelings freely. We thank God that we were able to create space for the Bali Nyonga and the Bawok people as well as the Oku and Mbessa people to express their feelings openly. Later, they were able to shake hands with each other. We hope the same approach is taken in the case of the Balikumbat-Bamalang issue but we have to be aware that each case is different and should be addressed on its own merit. We must constantly keep in mind that peace building is not an achievement but rather a culture which takes into consideration the fact that community relations change according to the circumstances.

Your Commission is not only involved in resolving inter-village and inter-tribal conflicts; you also do much appreciable work at the level of individuals, especially the most vulnerable: women and children. Tell us about your work in that area.

Yes, women and children form a very vulnerable and often neglected stratum of our society. Human traffickers, who are particularly active in our region of the country, know it and openly prey on our women and children. It is thanks to the relentless efforts of our Commission that the very first case of its kind in our country was brought to a court of law against a human trafficker, who was condemned and is now serving a jail term in Bamenda. She is a Cameroonian woman who trafficked a young girl and her baby from Nigeria. As we began our investigation into the matter, we learned that the woman in question was a hardened human trafficker, who had been involved in that business for several years. No one had ever challenged her until the Justice and Peace Commission came onto the scene. We worked together with the Franciscan Sisters, who run the Paul VI Pastoral Centre in Mendankwe, to rescue the said girl and her son from the clutches of the trafficker. It was an expensive investigation and it took over a year before the matter could come up for hearing. We're glad the trafficker is now in jail and the girl and her son are safe back to their home country.

I would imagine that the victims of human trafficking are usually poor and helpless. How do they ever get legal assistance, given that such services are not always cheap?

You're right. Many of these people are poor and are usually not aware of the assistance they can get from the law. They are ignorant about the law on child trafficking and we are in the process of educating them on their rights. We find out who needs justice and we educate them on what to do to have justice rendered them. You mentioned the cost of legal assistance; that is a thorny issue indeed. We have limited financial resources but we're glad to say that more and more lawyers are becoming sensitive to the needs of the poor and the marginalised in our society and are ready to take up such

matters charge free. At times the Commission carries out the case work when it is absolutely necessary to assist those who cannot afford even the basic fees for filing a matter in court. We have taken up such cases before and have had spectacular successes defending the poor and the marginalised. We're happy the courts of the Northwest Region are cooperating with us in many of such cases.

One thing is certain, though. If we have alternative conflict resolution mechanisms in place, the work load of the judges will be considerably reduced. There are cases that come to court where out-of-court and amicable solutions would do. If more structures, like the Justice and Peace Commission, existed, they would easily intervene and resolve such conflicts before they go to court. Our aim is to achieve reconciliation at every level; help people to live in peace with themselves and with their neighbours.

You also help educate couples in marital matters. Tell us about your work in that area.

Yes, we are very concerned about women who are ignorant of their rights and obligations, especially in marital matters. Take the case of a woman who has contracted a traditional marriage with a man and has been living with him for well over twenty years. In the eyes of the law and of the Church, she is not married. In the event of a breakdown of this quasi-marriage relationship, as we see happening so often, such a woman has nowhere to go for redress. The courts do not recognise her as a married woman, since no legal document exists to prove that she is legally married, and the Church does not recognise her marriage either, since no Church document bears witness to her marriage to the man. She ends up the loser. The man, for his part, walks away, usually with another woman, much younger than her. That's the classic example of what happens to many women in our country today. Our role, as the Justice and Peace Commission, is to educate the woman and the man as to the importance of contracting their marriage before State and Church authorities. The future of many women is ruined because of ignorance in such

matters. Our Commission is out to educate our people because the stability of the home is one of our primary objectives.

I salute you, Professor Daniel Noni Lantum!

It surprises me that I always seem to find words of gratitude for people only when they are no longer with us; when they have, as we Catholics say, gone ahead of us marked with the sign of faith. It is only then that my heart, mind, and lungs pour out of my trembling lips words soaked in tears and wrapped in long moments of silence, interspersed with sighs and much headshaking. Today, however, I have decided to sing the praises of a man who is still very much alive, and to whom I owe a well-nourished debt of gratitude.

Whenever I take a respite from the hectic and often frenzied life I live in Douala to peer down the winding path I have travelled over the past forty years or more, I see Professor Daniel Noni Lantum, Emeritus Professor of Public Health of the University of Yaounde School of Medicine, also known by his Nso traditional title as Shuufaay wo Bastos, holding up a torchlight to guide my steps, especially in the early years of my adult life. And for that, I want him to know I am grateful. He has long retired from active academic life and lives peacefully in his home in the neighbourhood of Bastos in Yaounde, Cameroon's political capital.

I will let the waves at memory beach wash back to 1976. That was my last year at the University of Yaounde. We had just finished our degree exam and were waiting for the results. For my friends and me, it was a period of uneasy recess in which we loitered about aimlessly, occasionally making forays into neighbourhoods of low repute, with their bulging, rowdy bars where clients in varying stages of drunkenness mingled freely with women of light virtues, clad in see-through dresses, mouthing obscenities and occasionally lifting their skirts to expose their wares to admiring audiences. As they squeezed their propped up bosoms against you in those crowded bars, you would even feel the smart ones skilfully searching your pockets for some cash. That is why it was always prudent to hide your wallet

in your socks for it could be snatched out of your back pocket within a twinkle of an eye.

The next day, we would then kill the boredom of waiting by sitting around in groups and comparing notes about the conquests of the previous evening. We were, for the most part, in our mid twenties and constantly in heat, and whorehouses were an irresistible attraction that served as a release valve for the pent up stress of waiting for the results of the exams.

Come to my office

I remember running into Professor Lantum one afternoon as I was leaving the Department of African and Afro-American Studies, where Professor Bernard Nsokika Fonlon, of glorious memory, had, for several decades, hoisted the flag of academic excellence that stuck out like a sore thumb from amid the chaos of mediocrity that characterised the other departments. After the habitual exchanges of civilities, he asked me about my studies. I told him I had just written my degree exams and was expecting the results any day. He then asked me to come to his office the next day. What time? I asked. Ten o'clock. It's a deal, I said. His office was located at the then University Centre for Health Sciences, more commonly known by its French acronym, CUSS.

Ten o'clock the next day, my trembling hand gave a weak knock on his office door. Without even caring to look up, his secretary grunted: "What do you want?" I told her I had an appointment with the Professor. Could she tell him I was already around, please? I expected her to ask me to identify myself, but she kept her nose buried in her typewriter. Since she did not care to even look at me, I began to scrutinise her. Boy, did she have one hell of a generous bosom! She must have felt my eyes 'undressing' her for she suddenly looked up and asked aggressively: "Do you want to take my picture, or what?" I quickly said I was sorry. That Ewondo woman could be trouble; she could start a scene and there would be no end to it. Their reputation for picking quarrels at the drop of a hat follows them like the tail following a dog. But, I still could not get the picture of that

well-nourished bosom off my mind. “You better watch it boy,” I said to myself. “You could leave this office with a split skull from that lady’s shoe!”

Show me your talent

Shortly thereafter, Professor Lantum, who was in the neighbouring office, came in, greeted me and ushered me into his office. Walking past his secretary, I could not help taking another quick look at her well endowed chest – what a generous gift from nature!

As soon as we sat down, the Professor picked up a bunch of documents from the shelf behind his desk and handed them to me: “How soon do you think you can translate those for me? I’ve just finished a seminar/workshop on traditional medicine and I want the proceedings in English and French.” Heavens above! Was he really asking me to translate that bunch of documents into English? I had not even suspected why he had called me to his office in the first place. Even though I was in a bilingual degree programme and translation was one of my subjects, I had not expected to be so openly challenged to show how skilful I was in fondling our two official languages – English and French -- just a few months shy of a bilingual degree! Had it been a slim document of a few pages, I could have told him I would try to get it back to him in a day or two. Here I was, holding a pile of documents that must have weighed a tonne, or more, and being asked to give a deadline for translating them! Lord, have mercy! I frankly did not know what to say.

Professor Lantum saw my hesitation and embarrassment and decided to come to my rescue. “Listen,” he said, placing a reassuring hand on my trembling shoulder, “take a look at them and get to work immediately. I will be here to help and guide you. I know you’ve never done this type of work before, but you’ve chosen this field and I want you to excel in it. Come with me.” He led the way to his secretariat, where his secretary was now loudly chatting with a friend, who had dropped in for a visit. “This is your desk. That is a bilingual dictionary over there; I know you’ll need it. Get to work immediately

and we'll see how far you can go before the end of the day. My secretary will give you some paper. Good luck!" And with that, he turned his back on me and went straight back into his office. As I took a seat, I saw the two ladies whispering something to each other and eyeing me from head to toe. I decided to ignore them with a royal disdain.

Meeting traditional healers

As I browsed through those piles of mainly hand-written scripts, it became clear to me that I was about to face my baptism of fire in the field of translation. In later years, I would spend lonely moments in Madrid, Paris, Washington DC, and Edmonton, Canada, in hot pursuit of excellence in that field. Today, nearly forty years later, I still remember vividly that it all began that first day in Professor Lantum's office. I cannot count how many documents I have since translated; documents of varying lengths and complexity, from nine months poring over boring government bla! bla! bla! at the Economic and Social Council in Yaounde, to well over twenty years wallowing in the overwhelmingly intricate world of the oil industry in an American oil company in Douala; not to mention tonnes of religious documents that have passed through my fingers during all these years I have collaborated closely with His Eminence Christian Cardinal Tumi, the Archbishop Emeritus of the Douala Archdiocese. You name them, I have pored over them. I have also facilitated understanding in conferences from the interpreter's booth around the globe, but I have never forgotten that it all began in Professor Lantum's office in Yaounde in June or July of the year of our Lord 1976.

The fascinating world of ngambe men

Professor Lantum introduced me to the fascinating world of traditional medicine, which is what all those documents were about. Through his persistent effort, the Ministry of Public Health began a census of traditional healers in Cameroon, under his leadership. I met many of them in the Professor's office from every corner of the

Republic. The list of the diseases each of them claimed to treat ran into several dozens. A few of them were from my part of the country. One of them, in particular, was from my village and listed nearly forty diseases he claimed he could cure, the majority of them being sex-related. Had HIV-AIDS been in the news in those days, I'm sure he would have had it on his list as well. He probably does now for he is said to be still going strong in that field.

On minister's payroll

This traditional healer once told me a fascinating story, hard to verify, about someone who was then a minister in the Ahidjo government, whom, he claimed, had put him on his payroll. "Why has he put you on a salary?" I asked, not hiding my scepticism. "Don't you know that the man's wife had abandoned him?" That was news to me. And why would she do that to the poor man? I inquired. "You know women. That man's enemies had rendered his *weewee* a mere stunted growth between his legs, good only for passing out water. When he consulted me, I merely touched it with this stick," he showed me a short wooden stick entirely covered with a hairy animal skin, which he claimed was from the scrotum of a buffalo. "Yes, when this stick touched his *baabaa*, I saw wonders; it immediately stood at attention and the man had to rush to Briqueterie where as many as three women joined forces to help him quell it down. From that day, I've become his worker. He pays me whenever I ask him for money. Don't you know that he now has a new wife, young and plumb? It's thanks to me!" he said, smiling proudly. You talk of a blatant violation of medical ethics! How could a man, who claimed to be a medical doctor so openly discuss his patient's medical record? I wondered. Luckily for me, I did not need any assistance in that domain. He would perhaps have tried his magic stick on me too.

I heard all kinds of stories from those traditional healers, one as fascinating as the other. Be they men or women, they all claimed to perform miracles, especially in below-the-navel activities. I recall an encounter I had with one of them in the Professor's office. He said he was from Ebolowa. He came trailing behind him a relatively

young and nice-looking girl, carrying a bag I assumed contained some medicinal herbs. I asked him what his specialty was. He looked around to make sure no one was looking and then made a gesture with his right hand which carried the weight of obscenity. He then leaned towards me and asked to know the last time I had gone with a woman. Without even waiting for an answer, he beckoned his companion to give him the bag she was carrying. Opening it, he pulled out a small bottle with a white powdery substance in it. "All you need to do is sprinkle this in the direction of the woman you want, and she'll follow you like a sheep," he said, with a knowing wink. I took the bottle from him, scrutinised it for a minute and then turned round to look at his companion. He looked up in surprise, rightly guessing what I had in mind, and quickly seized the bottle from me, screaming with laughter and shaking his head disapprovingly: "No, no, not with her! You're a dangerous man. If you buy it from me, you have to go to someone else, not her!" With that, he led his companion out of the office, and I could hear him telling her how dangerous the young men in the capital city are. I never saw him again.

My confidence swells

A few days into my translation work with Professor Lantum, my confidence started to swell and bubble over. What I had at first thought I could not do, I was now doing well, and loving it. In fact, I began to churn out several pages of hand-written translation that the Professor's secretary could not handle, complaining that my translation was making her neglect the office work for which she was employed. If I remember well, the Professor had to hire the services of a temporary secretary with whom I worked well.

My first salary

The most memorable part of the work I did for Professor Lantum was the pay I received at the end of the month. A month after I had been working for him, he called me into his office and handed me an envelope. When he saw how confused I was, he said:

“That’s your pay. You’ve done commendable work for me and I’m glad I hired you.” I wondered if he saw how much my hands trembled as I held onto that envelope. I didn’t frankly know what to say or do. He and I had not even discussed how much he was to pay me and if he had given me anything I would still have been happy. But for him to give me 50.000 francs was simply unbelievable. 50.000 francs in 1976 must be worth 500.000 francs today!

That was my first salary ever and I think I’ll remember the effect it had on me till I die. I have since earned good sums of money as salary. When I worked for the oil industry, my salary hit seven digits, not counting the bonuses we received for one thing or another, but no amount I have earned has had as much an effect on me as my first salary from Professor Lantum. I think I did shed a tear and my voice broke as I thanked him.

I remember clutching that envelope in my trembling hands and heading for Melen where my brother, Kenjo, and his family lived. I showed it to him and told him Professor Lantum had paid me for the work I had been doing for him. My brother shared my joy and said he had always known Doctor Dan to be a good man. He always called Professor Lantum, Doctor Dan, as did, and still do, many people who are close to him.

My graduation

I was successful in my degree examination and was awarded a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Bilingual Studies. Back then, jobs for Bilingual Degree holders, as for many other graduates in other fields, were easy to come by. I remember dropping applications for a job at the National Assembly and at the Presidency of the Republic. Some friends of mine, who leaned towards teaching, took the road to the Higher Teacher Training College, known in French as “Ecole Normale Supérieure”, where they were given admission on the spot. Professor Chindje Kouleu, who was teaching at ESIJY (the Yaounde School of Journalism), said he would be happy to have me on board. I had met Professor Chindje in Aix en Provence in southern France the previous year when my friends and I went for a language

immersion course. He left shortly after our arrival to come back to Cameroon where he got a job in ESIJY. When we returned from France, I met him on several occasions and he thought I was good material for journalism.

A few feet away from Ahidjo?

I discussed all these options with Professor Lantum and he said I still had a place by him, pending something more permanent. In early September 1976, I received word, through my late friend and brother, John Sabbas Bime, 'John B', to the intimate, that I was wanted at the Presidency. He was already a seasoned translator and conference interpreter in the Linguistics Services of the Presidency. After passing through several layers of security screening by guards, who seemed as if a smile had never crossed their lips, I was ushered, trembling like a leaf, into the translation office of the Linguistics Services. I was met by a certain French lady, Mrs. Atangana and the late Mr. William Mbelem. They said they had received my curriculum vitae and seen that I once studied Spanish. I told them I had received a pass in Spanish at the London GCE Ordinary Level at the Bilingual Grammar School in Man O'War Bay, but that my Spanish, for lack of use, had become fairly rusty. They said it did not matter how far back I had studied Spanish. They then gave me a piece of paper and asked me on the spot to write an application to the Secretary General for a scholarship to study Spanish in Madrid. The plan was that from Madrid I would then go to Paris or Washington, DC for translation and interpretation studies. It was the most amazing thing in my life. There I was, inside the Presidency of the Republic, the citadel of supreme power in Cameroon under the dreaded Ahmadou Ahidjo, who, at that moment, was perhaps just a few feet away from me. I even thought I could feel his breath on my neck. Boy, was I ever eager to get out of there!

Victim of Confusion

Confusion ran riot on my face and in my mind. Had it not been for the presence of my friend and brother, John B, I would have told them I was still going to think about it. John came up to me and congratulated me and laughed my confusion away. "Go for it," he said. That was when I wrote the application. Before I left, I was told to prepare because my departure for Madrid was to be in a week's time. Just enough time for me to get a new passport and I would be leaving.

I came back to the office to tell Professor Lantum what had happened and how confused I was. He wondered why I was confused and instead gave me a hearty congratulation that greatly oiled the hinges of my self-confidence. I had also been worried because there was no family member of mine around, my brother, Kenjo, having been transferred to Bamenda. I felt uncomfortably alone and lonely and Professor Lantum's reassuring words came as a balm to my heart.

"Don't go! Stay here!" urged Professor Fonlon

A week later, I was called to the Presidency and given my passport and a plane ticket and instructed to go to the Spanish Embassy where a visa was affixed to my passport. A few days to my departure, I had an unexpected visit from Professor Bernard Nsokika Fonlon, may eternal rest be his! He did not visit me, he sent for me and I met him in his office. He said he had heard that I was about to leave for Spain. I said he was correct. He then said he had been eyeing me for a position in his department and that he thought it was not too late for me to cancel my departure for Madrid and he would give me a teaching position with him. He assured me he would do all in his power to ensure that I got a scholarship for studies that would lead to a doctorate from an American university.

Some months earlier, he and I had discussed the possibility of my applying for a position in an American university to study Afro-American literature with the view to coming back and teaching in his department. We had even toyed with the idea of my applying for

admission to a university in Cairo, Egypt, to study Arabic. Professor Fonlon's contention was that there was a lot written in Arabic by Cameroonian Muslim scholars in North Cameroon that needed to be translated and made available to the academic world. If I studied Arabic in Cairo, I would then come back home and focus attention on the mass of literary work produced in the North in Arabic which, unfortunately, was virtually inaccessible to the rest of the academic world. He thought he had sufficient clout with the Egyptian authorities to obtain a scholarship for me to study there. He saw his department taking a lead in that area and introducing Arabic studies at the University of Yaounde.

My decision to take a totally different route in life laid waste all those plans he was beginning to nurture for his department. As we talked, he said something quite poignant when he asked me to look at him. "I am no longer a young man," he said, "and I don't have long to be at the University. I'll really be happy if you are on my staff before I finally retire." Looking at him and seeing how helpless he looked, I felt a lump crawling up my throat and the confusion I thought had finally gone to rest, resurfaced. Before me that morning, Professor Fonlon suddenly appeared frail, weak, old and frustrated. My heart nearly missed a beat. I told him I would think about it.

No turning back

When I left Professor Fonlon, I headed straight for Professor Lantum's office to give him an account of our meeting, which had further intensified my confusion. Should I go, or should not I go? Professor Lantum left his desk, walked up to me, placed his hand on my shoulder, looked at me in the face and said: "Don't miss this opportunity to leave this country. It is not always easy for anyone to leave but now that it is the Presidency itself asking you to go, go without delay! Don't look back! Just Go! If you get there and things don't work out for you, you can always switch fields and do whatever you want. But, for heavens' sake, don't stay! Go!"

I do not know if he realised how helpful his words were to me. I walked out of his office and went straight to my friend and brother,

John B, to tell him I was leaving. Access to phones was not as easy in those days as it is today and so I could not reach any of my family members in Bamenda or Nso to tell them I was leaving for Madrid. Professor Lantum said I should not worry about my family. They would understand once they received a letter from me from outside the country. I still had one difficult step to take, though: go back to Professor Fonlon and tell him I had weighed his offer carefully but would not be taking it. And that is what I did the next day. I thanked him for his confidence in me but said I was leaving all the same. He seemed shattered by my decision but said he understood me and wished me well.

Fonlon under suspicion

My ‘defection’ notwithstanding, Professor Fonlon and I remained good friends till he answered his Maker’s call in August 1986, ten years later. I recall that in the summer of 1984, two years before his demise, he and I sat in his hotel room in the Canadian city of Calgary, where he had been invited to a literary conference. I was then a student of Comparative Literature Department at the University of Alberta in Edmonton and had travelled to Calgary for the said conference. This was shortly after the botched coup d’état of April 1984. He told me about the thick cloud of suspicion that was hanging over his head because the Biya regime was convinced that he was in collusion with the coup plotters. One thing he said, and quite categorically too, was that he had worked very closely over the years with Ahidjo, whom he called in Lamnso “wir-gassah” (the Hausa man), and that he was not prepared to denounce him, as some others were doing at the University. He loudly regretted that university professors, who had literally licked the ground on which Ahidjo walked, were now the ones loudly denouncing him because they wanted to be in President Biya’s good books. He thought their action was tantamount to intellectual prostitution of the worst kind. University dons should take stands on issues and not vacillate like leaves in the wind, he thought; and that is what he did, damning the consequences.

In the course of our discussion, he recalled how sad he had felt that I had not joined him back in 1976. He then wondered, given the chaos back home, especially among university circles, whether I had not been right not to remain there after all. I told him I had discussed the matter with Professor Lantum who had urged me to leave. He said that, with hindsight, Professor Lantum's advice was probably the right one.

John B, my brother, thank you!

Even though this tribute is mainly to Professor Lantum, I will like to highlight for praise and infinite gratitude the role my friend and brother, John B, played to ease the feeling of confusion I felt shortly before my departure. On the morning of that day, I asked the taxi driver taking me to the airport to stop over at his house in Melen. He had told me he would like to accompany me to the airport. As we were about to leave, he gave me a fur-coated jacket that was to save me from the Madrid cold that winter. I was leaving Cameroon at the onset of winter in Europe totally unprepared for it. Had he not given me that fur-coated jacket, I would have had it rough in Madrid. John, my friend, my brother, you are no longer with us but know that I cherished that gift immensely. You were a life saver. Thank you, my brother.

Several years later, John was to remind me of that day I left for Madrid, drenched in tears. We were sitting in my office in Douala where I worked for an American oil company. John would always drop by whenever he was in transit through Douala. He recalled that as he stood at the airport watching as I boarded the plane, he suddenly saw someone racing across the tarmac to the plane. To his surprise, it was Professor Lantum. He wondered where the Professor was going and why he was boarding the plane just as it was about to taxi down the runway. Inside the plane, I did not know what was happening outside but I recalled that as the plane was about to leave, I suddenly heard someone call my name. I turned round and it was Professor Lantum coming towards me. He immediately handed me an envelope, wished me well and disappeared. I was so stunned that I

didn't know what to do or say. As the plane taxied down the runway ready for take-off, I opened the envelope and it contained a hundred thousand francs CFA. I wept openly for I had practically no money on me, the Spanish Embassy having told me that I would only receive my stipend from their Foreign Ministry the day classes began, which was still several weeks ahead.

Panic in Madrid

It took the Spanish Foreign Ministry several months to start paying me because it was said that my documents had still not arrived from Yaounde. I remember writing a letter dripping with frustration to Professor Lantum, wondering aloud if my departure for Spain had been such a bright idea after all. I told him how the Spanish government was not coming clean with its own part of the bargain and that I was practically broke, desperate and totally frustrated. I must have sounded suicidal for Professor Lantum sent me a magnificent reply to my letter that brought me back to my senses and made me face the reality of the life I was then living. He delved into Nso martial history, reminding me that we, Nso people, have always been fighters from time immemorial; that no Nso man worth the name ever fled from the battle field, and that every Nso man, who has ever fallen in battle, did so with a spear sticking out of his chest, never out of his back; and that only cowards, in their flight from the carnage of the battle field, received the spear in their back. He did not think I was a coward and he knew I could and would make it, temporary problems of money and adjustment to a new culture notwithstanding.

Change of focus

I had never received such a heart-warming letter before, nor any ever since, and, poor as I remained for a good part of the first months in Madrid, I never again questioned the wisdom of my presence in the Spanish capital. In fact, I even started to laugh my troubles away. I just did not focus on poverty or loneliness anymore. I had a definite purpose in mind, that is, study the language and head

on for greater pursuits. Surprisingly, as I began to realise that I could not change the world to fit my mood, I started to focus on changing my mood to fit the world. I realised that no amount of kicking and screaming was going to make the Spaniards pay my stipend any time soon, so I decided not to make the non-payment of the said stipend an issue for a court case, and, with my mind focused on other things, I began to enjoy my studies. I even began to make friends with Spanish and foreign students alike. I even received a proposal from one student to move into an apartment much closer to the university, which he was sharing with four other students. We called it “*las Naciones Unidas*”, the “United Nations”, because we came from different countries of the world. One fellow was from the United States, representing North America, another from Peru, representing South America, one from Japan, representing Asia, I from Cameroon, representing the great continent of Africa, and there was a Spanish guy, home bred and proud of his historic city, Madrid. To him, Madrid was the centre of the universe. Was it not from Madrid, then the centre of civilised humanity, that the great conquistadores had fanned out into the world, planting the Spanish royal flag in remote corners of the world, especially in the Americas! “Viva, Espana!” What a great chap Pablo was!

Life became fun as we would buy bottles of excellent Spanish wine and chill out in the living room in the evening, listening to Spanish flamenco dance music oozing out of the turn-table at the corner. Before Professor Lantum’s letter, I was a grouchy and sullen man and none of the students with me in class dared approach me, which increased my feeling of despair and loneliness. After his letter, I took control of my life, changed my focus to more productive pursuits and Madrid became a marvellous city for me. I did not suddenly become richer, but I ceased to think of myself as a poor helpless African student, waiting cap in hand for a hand-out and venting my bile to whoever was near enough and willing to listen to me. This was thanks to Professor Lantum’s robust reminder to me that I needed to lift myself out of that complaining phase and go on with my life. In the face of adversity, chickening out was not the

solution. What really mattered, I learnt from him, was staying focused on the reasons of my presence in Madrid.

Back home

Upon my return to the country in late 1984, months after the botched putsch against the still stuttering Biya administration, I went straight to Professor Lantum's office, that same office that held many memories for me, being the springboard from where my initiation into the world of translation took off nearly a decade earlier. Same office, same desk but different secretary. The one whose bosom had caught my lecherous eye some ten years earlier had left. In her place, sat another one, who was not much to write home about in terms of looks, but who turned out to be a very nice person to work with, reserved, respectful and motherly.

As soon as Professor Lantum saw me, he asked me to take a seat. He was still working with the World Health Organisation (WHO) on projects in Mbandjock and the Bamenda region. This time around, I was already a seasoned, certified translator and conference interpreter; no longer the frightened greenhorn, fresh-out-of-school-baby translator that I was when, years earlier, I pored over volumes of documents on traditional medicine. Even during the nine months I worked for the Economic and Social Council in 1985, a period I consider a total waste of my precious time, I still collaborated with Professor Lantum. I felt proud to have assisted him to organise a seminar on sterility in Cameroon that made headlines for weeks in the local media.

A well written and well-read man

Professor Lantum writes extensively on just about every topic imaginable: medical literature, poetry, biography, sociology, etc. He is also a well published man and, I believe, a well read one too. I have had occasion to review some of his writing for the media, and I have not always been tender towards him. I believe my role as a reviewer is not to flatter the writer but rather to give an honest appraisal of the writer's work, mainly from the point of view of form and substance.

As regards substance, I could not always pretend to give a fair appraisal of topics of a medical nature but I would focus attention on the form, that is, the language carrying whatever message he wanted to transmit, and how the work was structured.

As a biographer, he has given due respect to some of his contemporaries who have gone ahead of him: Father Aloysius Wankuy, the first West Cameroonian Catholic priest, and Professor Bernard Nsokika Fonlon, who he calls his friend and brother. His knowledge of Nso culture is unrivalled and he has several publications in that area, dating from the early days of his student life in Nigeria. He has also produced scholarly publications in medicine and in history, focusing mainly on relations between the Nso, the Bamum and the Bafia people, commonly called the “Mandjara”, the Bafia word for “brother” or “sister”. History has it that these brotherly people share a common ancestor. Historical forces beyond their control dispersed them in the Centre, West and Northwest Regions of our country. Of late, Professor Lantum has been very instrumental in bringing these brotherly peoples together in cultural activities that have greatly enhanced dialogue and understanding among them.

Thank you, Prof.

Professor Lantum, you are very proud of your traditional title, Shuufaay wo Bastos. Whenever I peer down this road of life which the good Lord has permitted me to walk all these years, I see you standing at strategic locations, serving as a sentinel pointing the way out of difficult situations, especially during those early years of my adult life, and I want you to know I am grateful. You firmly placed me on the road I have walked all these years, the road of translation and conference interpretation. On this sometimes bumpy road, I have raised a family and seen my three children grow and prosper. You have my infinite gratitude. I did not want to wait for you to answer the Master’s inevitable call to recall to others’ hearing all that you have been to me and done for me. I want you to hear them from my own lips when both of us are still alive and active.

I am penning these words on a cold, rainy night in the quiet precincts of Pope Paul VI Memorial Centre in Mendankwe, Bamenda, just a few days shy of my sixty first birthday. Sixty one years on the surface of the planet earth is not sixty one days, to put it mildly. At sixty one years of age, retired from active duty but endowed with good health, I can only thank God Almighty for making it happen. The list of my boyhood friends, who have not been so Lucky to count as many years as I have, is lengthening by the day. That is why I deemed it necessary to take a few days off to be alone and to look down the long, winding and sometimes slippery road I have walked all these years, and to thank you for your part in it. On this moonless night, drenched in rain, wrapped in a cold wind that is noisily assaulting my window pane, I thought I should thank you, dear Professor Daniel Noni Lantum, for the role you have played, unknowingly perhaps, to make me the person I was yesterday, and what I am today. May God bless you, Sir !

Why I Donate Blood

A friend was at my office the other day when my phone rang. It was a nurse from the blood bank of the Laquintinie Hospital in Douala. She told me a woman was scheduled for a delicate surgical operation that afternoon but did not have enough blood. Could I come over and give her some blood? I told her I would be there within an hour.

Then I gave my friend the gist of my short conversation with the nurse and he looked at me as if I had just agreed to do something illegal. Still with astonishment audible in his voice, he asked, “Are you really seriously thinking of going to give your blood?” I said I was. “But, from every indication, you don’t even know who this woman is!” He sounded really puzzled. “That’s correct,” I said, “but I’m used to it. I don’t know her and I don’t care to know her. It’s enough for me to give her my blood in the hope that she’ll have a successful operation.” Still looking at me as if I’d just volunteered to do something crazy, he asked, “Why would you give your blood to a complete stranger?” My answer intrigued him all the more. “I donate my blood for Monica.”

And who is Monica?

When I mentioned Monica, his eyes looked as if they would pop out of their sockets. “And who the hell is Monica?” “Monica was my sister; the only sister I ever had. She passed on in 1975. She would have died ten years earlier had someone, nay, some people, many unknown to us, not given her their blood.”

It was the blood of complete strangers that gave my sister a new lease of life. Although she passed on several years later, it was not for lack of blood. I was still very young when she took ill and was rushed to the Catholic Hospital in Shisong. She was in hospital for several weeks when one day my parents appeared extremely worried. I could hear them in hushed tones discussing my sister’s illness and, from every indication, all was not well. Then my father called my brother

and me and asked us to walk the ten miles that separated our home from the hospital to greet our sister.

We were always excited when we had to travel out of our village of Nkar to Kumbo or Shisong. We loved the open spaces and the fresh air and the hills that roll on and on like waves and the valleys we had to cross to reach our destination. A journey on foot of about three hours would take us nearly twice that long.

When we arrived at the hospital, we stood at a respectful distance, admiring the doctors and the nurses in their impeccably white garments, some with stethoscopes hanging around their necks. We admired the clinically clean environment of the hospital although I immediately hated, as I still do, the all pervasive smell of drugs that flooded the hospital wards. I have always found something inexplicably intimidating about hospitals, and that is perhaps why I never ever dreamt of studying medicine. Even when friends of mine and I dreamt of future careers, medicine was never on my list. The mere thought of the smell of medicines, which I barely tolerate, accounted for much in my rejection of that field of studies.

Intimidating sight

When my brother and I arrived at the hospital, we saw a cousin of ours sitting on one of the benches in the hospital courtyard. He immediately led us to our sister's ward. What struck me then, and I still occasionally have visions of that scene, was the tubes dangling over my sister's bed, one leading into her nostrils and the other into her arm. I could not believe that the frail figure in bed was my sister until she turned round, saw us and rewarded our presence with a smile. The face that the weak smile lit up was truly my sister's and a shiver ran through me and tears clouded my eyes and soon began to run down my cheeks.

Attached to the tubes were two small bags, one containing a clear water-like liquid and the other a dark reddish liquid, which our cousin whispered to us, was blood. What an intimidating sight! I nearly fled from that room. My sister could barely speak and was in considerable

pain. Shortly thereafter, two nurses walked in, gave us broad smiles and asked us to step out of the room while they attended to my sister.

As we stood speechless outside, our cousin told us of people donating blood to our sister, and invited us to go and see for ourselves. We followed him down the long, impeccably clean corridor, all the time aware of the all-pervasive smell of drugs of all sorts. There, at one window, we saw an uncle of ours, and two other people, sitting on chairs with tubes dangling from their arms and emptying blood into little pocket-like containers. Our uncle called out to us and told us he was giving blood for our sister. He then pointed to the other two men with him and asked us to greet them because they too had volunteered to give blood to our sister.

Up until that moment, none of us had ever heard of people giving blood to others. My attention was entirely focused on those needles sticking out of people's arms and I remember wincing from the imaginary pain I thought they must be feeling. Oh, and that much blood being drained from someone! Boy, I didn't think I could give away so much blood and still survive! That scene of people sitting there with their arms stretched out and needles sticking from them was to remain with me for several years thereafter.

Later, I learnt how those generous people were just passing by when they were asked to voluntarily give their blood to save my sister, and they had accepted. How selfless and generous they were! Our sister pulled through that crisis, recovered well enough to come back home to us.

I remember how she always thanked those people who had been so generous to give her a new lease of life. She did not even know what was happening as she had been for a good part of the time in a coma, but whenever she talked about her stay in hospital, which was quite often, she always recalled the huge quantity of blood that she received. "And where would so much blood have come from, had it not been for those generous souls?" she always wondered; and you could clearly hear echoes of gratitude in her voice.

Nearly ten years later, in 1975, the illness struck again and my sister gave up the struggle and answered her Maker's call to come for

her eternal reward. We, however, remained eternally grateful to those who had generously given their blood that enabled her to survive so many years after the initial crisis.

Three years later, in 1978 I, in turn, received the challenge to give my blood to save a soul I did not know, or would never ever know. It came in a very unlikely place and time. I was in Master's Degree programme in Paris at the University of Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris III. A Cameroonian friend of mine and I left our morning class one day and were heading for the underground train station when we saw, parked by the roadside, bearing the unmistakable emblem of the Red Cross, a bus with quite some movement inside and around it.

We could have passed by without a second glance had a certain elegantly and smartly-dressed, medium height woman, of a certain age, wearing a smile that covered her face from ear to ear, not stopped us to ask if we could give blood to save someone. Her request took me completely aback and, without much reflection, I asked if they also wanted blood from people like my friend and me. I had not sincerely thought that the French Red Cross would want blood from black people. It is incredible how much racism you assimilate when you live in a society where the dividing line between races was so clearly demarcated.

That spunky old woman, who had a lot of life in her, suddenly spun round to face me. The smile had gone from her face and she grabbed my arm, looked at me directly in the face and said: "My son, why do you, young people, continue to promote this obnoxious division among people? Aren't we all human beings? Does the blood that flows through your veins any different from the one that flows through mine? Please, my young people, if you don't want to give your blood, I understand, but it shouldn't be for the reason you evoke here."

I was taken completely aback by her reaction. I had expected her to merely shrug her shoulders, turn her back on us and go for the other people of her skin colour, but instead she took time to remind me of the oneness of humanity, and how narrow my own understanding of that humanity was! As I listened to her, I suddenly

remembered my sister, Monica. I thought I saw her face at one corner of the sky, nodding to me to give my blood; and I did. I walked up to that bus and was graciously ushered in by a charming and smiling nurse dressed in an impeccably white uniform. My Cameroonians friend, after much hesitation, also followed.

We were greeted by nurses, men and women, dressed in impeccably white gowns, whose reassuring smiles drove away all fear we had of giving our blood. When we told them it was the first time we were giving our blood, they tapped us affectionately on the shoulder and commended us for such a great gesture. They asked us not to worry and reassured us that all would be over before we knew it. A few minutes later, I felt a slight pain as the syringe homed into my vein. I was told to occasionally clench and release my fist as the blood oozed down the tube into a small container beside me.

Twenty minutes, or so later, it was over and we were given a cup of warm milk with a piece of bread and then released with many thanks from the nurses. At the foot of the bus, stood the grandmother, who had rebuked me for my comment earlier. She walked up to us and surprised us with big kisses on our cheeks. I walked away feeling that I had achieved something that day. To my Cameroonian friend, it was just one of those adventures one falls into during one's stay in Europe. To me, however, it was the beginning of what has become a regular exercise I perform for my sister, Monica. Each time I give my blood, I see her there at the corner of my mind, smiling approvingly and I know that I am doing the right thing.

The Paris Red Cross later sent us certificates as blood donors. I carried mine with me for a good number of years. I later studied at Georgetown University in Washington D.C. before spending a number of years at the University of Alberta in Edmonton Canada. In all these cities I was generous with my blood, and no one turned it down because it came from a black man.

Blood donor N° B298

I came back home in the early 1980s, settled in the city of Douala and continued the practice of donating my blood. In fact, I am blood

donor No B298 of the Laquintinie Blood Bank. I always answer present whenever I receive a call telling me that someone needs my blood. I always give it as if I am giving it to my sister, Monica. I was too young at the time she needed blood but someone, nay some people, gave her their blood and with it, a new lease of life for several years thereafter.

Some months ago, I was asked to give blood to someone who was at the terminal stage of life. He had cancer and the blood I and others gave was not to save his life, for the doctors said he barely had a few months to live. We gave him blood to ease the atrocious pains he was feeling and prepare him for death without too much agony. There too, I believe my blood went to a worthy cause. It may not save a life, but it soothes a soul that is on its way to its Maker. Nothing, I believe, can be more dignifying than to help a man or woman die in dignity.

The Kenya Airway tragedy

A few years ago, a terrible tragedy hit our land. A Kenya Airways plane from Douala to Nairobi crashed shortly after take-off in very bad weather. No one survived. I felt that tragedy deep in my heart, not because I lost anyone in it, but because had it happened a few hours earlier, I could have been one of its casualties. I had flown on that same plane the morning of that day en route from Mumbai, India, through Nairobi to Douala. It had been a very smooth flight.

I remember looking out the window and admiring the thick forests of Equatorial Africa that look from the air like a huge, green carpet unrolled over the land. I also remember wondering, as I am sure just about everyone who flies over those thick forests does, just what would happen if that plane suddenly plunged into those trees. Would they carpet its fall and hold it hanging onto their branches until rescue arrived, or would those huge branches, holding up that massive carpet of greenness, simply tear our plane apart? Unsettling thoughts, indeed! I felt my fingers tightening their grip around my Rosary! Thank God, nothing happened and we arrived safely in Douala. The plane was fairly empty and when some of us dropped

off in Douala, the few remaining passengers and crew flew onto Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire.

The next day, Saturday, we heard of the terrible tragedy that had befallen that plane in the early hours of the morning on its return flight to Nairobi. That tragedy touched me deeply. I felt a part of me had gone down with that plane into the swamps and tears flowed freely from my eyes. God alone knows why he spared me from that tragedy. Perhaps he still wants me to continue to give freely of my blood to the poor and the needy.

Empty blood bank

I remember a month or so after that plane crash, I was called to the Laquintinie Blood Bank to donate blood, and what I saw there that day was truly lamentable. People queued up to receive blood but there was not a pint of blood available anywhere. One gentleman, in particular, skipped from one leg to the other, murmuring inaudibly, more to himself than to anyone in particular, occasionally stretching out his arms in the air in complete despair. Others expressed their frustration in louder voices, some even threatening to harm the staff if they did not give them blood for their loved ones. But the truth was that there was no blood!

I asked one of the nurses what was wrong with the gentleman, who seemed visibly on the verge of a mental crisis, and she said his wife was at that moment in the emergency ward between life and death, and needed blood as a matter of urgency. But why not give him the blood he needed? I inquired. That was when she flung open one of the deep freezers near her and showed its content to me: zero blood! Not even a pint of blood anywhere in the blood bank.

I asked why there was no blood in the blood bank. That is when I learnt that all blood disappeared with the Kenya Airways plane crash. The nurse explained that when it became known that the Kenya Airways plane was missing, hospital officials had quickly done what was expected of them, that is, put together blood from all blood banks in the city in anticipation of possible survivors from the plane crash, who could need blood. In fact, the nurse in question gave her

bosses a pass grade for that action. “We did just what should’ve been done, that is, get ready with blood to rescue the survivors. That’s great!”

But then, the problem arose when there were no survivors and the blood, that was taken out from the city blood banks somehow never found its way back where it belonged. Intrigued, I asked what had happened to it. She looked at me with a knowing smile on her lips, and said, shrugging her shoulders: “On est au Cameroun, non!” Then as she walked away, she pointed to a man, a visibly high-ranking official of the hospital medical staff, “That’s my boss,” she said with disdain, “go and ask him. It’s they, the doctors, who know where all the blood has gone”.

It would seem that when no one survived the plane crash, the blood taken from the blood banks in the city, developed legs and probably vanished into people’s private clinics. It is no secret that many government doctors either have their own clinics or work in other private hospitals and clinics for extra cash. The blood that some of us contributed for free to the Laquintinie Blood Bank to save the lives of the poor, ended up in the fridges of private hospitals and clinics, and now run through the veins of the well-to-do, who must have paid highly for it.

Right there, before me, I watched helplessly as a man skipped from one foot to the other, murmuring impotent words of despair as his wife lay bleeding after a botched operation, her life hanging in the balance for lack of clean, tested blood. Even the blood that was being drained from the two or three hungry-looking individuals this man managed to convince to part with their blood, or most likely hired to sell him their blood, could not be used without being tested for parasites. Hospital sources say that a sizeable amount of the blood received from donors ends up being junked because of contamination from all types of viruses (HIV, STDs, Hepatitis ...).

Not long after the Kenya Airways tragedy, the Honourable Minister of Public Health was in town, campaigning for volunteers to donate blood to the empty blood banks of the city. Had he not been talking about a matter of life and death, I would have burst into

laughter when I heard him lamenting the low level of blood available in government hospitals in the city. But this was no laughing matter. Did he ever ask the hospital officials what had happened to the blood in blood banks? Did those officials, who welcomed him in impeccably white gowns, smiling broadly into television cameras, tell him where the blood initially earmarked for possible survivors of that tragic accident had gone?

That is, of course, not the kind of news any official of any hospital wants the ears of honourable men and women of the government to hear. And since no one cares to ask the views of mere nurses, the people who knew what happened to the blood that went missing after that plane crash, those honourable ears never heard the true story. Or maybe they heard but thought it wise to let sleeping dogs lie.

I continue to give blood

The theft of blood from our blood banks notwithstanding, I continue to give my blood, for free. Hopefully, it does give a poor person, who cannot afford to buy blood, a new lease of life, just as the blood of generous volunteers gave my sister a second chance to come back home to us. It is because of you, Monica, that I continue to give my blood to the poor and the needy, even if it ends up being hijacked and pumped into the veins of the rich by unscrupulous doctors for a higher fee.

As I donate my blood for you, Monica, I remember vividly that first time at the Shisong hospital when I watched those intimidating tubes plunged into your arm and that small pocket-like bag with blood in it, dangling over your head, and the blood gradually dripping down that tube into your vein. That blood came from people we did not even know, and who never knew you, but who made it possible for you to come back home into the bosom love of your family.

The Good Lord did later call you to Himself to receive your eternal reward for a life well lived. As I lay bouquets of tears on your grave, in memoriam, I continue to share this precious liquid of life I

received for free. It was given to me without charge, I will continue to share it with others, without charge. Hopefully, I will save someone's life so that no poor man may again skip from one leg to the other, waiting in vain for this precious liquid to save the life of his loved one, fighting for her life in a hospital operating theatre. May my blood continue to give life where there is despair. Amen.

References

1. Saint Augustine, *Confessions* (5, 13).
2. *Cameroon Panorama* N^{os} 376, April 1993, pp. 17-19, and 377, May 1993, pp. 18-21.
3. Saint Augustine, *op. cit.* 9,6.
4. Ball, Ann, *Modern Saints: Their Lives and Faces*, Rockford, Ill. Tan Books and Publishers Inc., 1983, pp. 51-2.
5. Peale, Norman Vincent, *The Amazing Power of Positive Thinking*, New York : A Cedar Book N^o 108, 1984, pp. 163-4.
6. *ibid.*, p. 158.
7. *ibid.*, p. 64.

Faith conversion experiences are first of all personal before being universal. While biblical history records relatively few conversion encounters as dramatic and as explosive as Saint Paul's on the road to Damascus, it is not rare for individuals in the throes of a religious conversion to fall prey to intensely agonizing confusion. That is what happened to Martin Jumbam when he marched for peace in his country alongside the charismatic and irrepressible Emeritus Archbishop of Douala in Cameroon, Christian Cardinal Tumi. He joined the prelate as a secular journalist but went back home more than ever conscious of his state as a fallen Christian, the first step in his journey of faith. Since then, all his writing, be it secular or religious, now bears the fruits of that encounter, characterized by intense empathy for the human person. This book recounts the myriad ways Jumbam's encounters with Christian Cardinal Tumi have activated, nourished and inspired his faith.

MARTIN JUMBAM was born and raised in Nkar in the Diocese of Kumbo in the northern grassland region of English-speaking Cameroon. He is a translator and a conference interpreter by training, and a freelance journalist. He served for several years on the editorial board of *L'Effort camerounais*, the weekly newspaper of the Bishop's Conference of Cameroon. He also runs programmes on Radio Veritas, the radio of the Catholic Archdiocese of Douala, Cameroon. He is married with three children and lives with his family in the port city of Douala in Cameroon.



Langaa Research & Publishing
Common Initiative Group
P.O. Box 902 Mankon
Bamenda
North West Region
Cameroon

ISBN 978-9956-792-89-4

